The Queen Elizabeth Story

ROSEMARY SUTCLIFF

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BULAHDELAH
CENTRAL SCHOOL

London
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

2924

08-012

Oxford University Press, Ely House, London W.1
GLASGOW NEW YORK TORONTO MELBOURNE WELLINGTON
CAPE TOWN SALISBURY IBADAN NAIROBI LUSAKA ADDIS ABABA
BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS KARACHI LAHORE DACCA
KUALA LUMPUR HONG KONG TOKYO

First edition 1950
Reprinted 1952
First issued in this edition 1958
Reprinted 1964, 1967

Printed in Great Britain by Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press), Ltd.,
Bungay, Suffolk

FOR
SUSAN

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I

ALL ABOUT PERDITA

IN the days when Queen Elizabeth was young, and ruled England from her great palace of Whitehall, and tulips and lilac-trees were strange new things from foreign parts, there was a little girl called Perdita Jane Pettle, who lived in a village in Devonshire. She lived in the Rectory with her father, who was the Rector, and her mother, who was lovely to look at and always laughing, and her elder brother Robin, when he was home from school. Then there were Tryphena-the-Kitchen and Billie-the-Garden, who were married and lived over the stables with a pot of marigolds on the window-sill, and last there was Peterkin, a dog with a large, soft heart, and a plumy tail like a collie, though the rest of him was pure otter-hound.

Broomhill—for that was the name of Perdita's village—sat comfortably in a green valley, with its meadows and its spinneys and quiet, peaty-brown river, sheltered from the worst of the wild west winds by the hills that shut it off from the ten-mile-distant sea. The road, rounding a corner, came into the village suddenly. First there was Five-Oak Spinney, then the Rectory, sitting back from the road, with a patch of grass and cobbles, which the villagers called 'Parson's Platt', spread out in

front of it. Next came the church, with its squat Norman tower rising from a green froth of elm-trees which always seemed to be trying to join hands with the Five-Oak Spinney, and so shut the Rectory off from the road altogether. The church was very plain outside, but inside there were cross-legged Crusader tombs, and crimson-winged angels supporting the hammerbeams of the roof, and a strange old wall-painting of St. Sebastian stuck full of arrows; and in the belfry hung the five great bells—Halsyon, Hautclere, Douce, John, and Gabriel—which seemed more like real people than just bells, to the folk who lived within sound of them. Beyond the church was the village street, with all the cottages strung out higgledy-piggledy along it, with their herb-plots and their apple-trees and their lean pigs. There was a Green half-way down the village, and at the farthest end of the street was a mossy stone gatehouse in the mossy stone wall that surrounded Whinworthy.

Whinworthy was half manor-house and half fortified farm. When the gates were open one could catch a glimpse of the warm huddle of out-buildings, and the house itself, long and grey and sleepy, with pigeons on the roof and lime-trees bending over it. It belonged to Adam Hilyarde, who went to school with Robin, as it had belonged to his father and his grandfather and his great-grandfather, and when he left school he would live in it, as they had done. But that would not be yet awhile, and in the meantime he spent his holidays

with his uncle, Sir John Annersly, over at Black Brendon, and there was a steward called George Prettyjohn living in the gatehouse and farming the land, with a wife who went in once a week to dust and air the house. Perdita's mother sometimes spoke of the days when the house had been lived in, before Adam's father had been drowned at sea and Adam's mother had died and gone to join him; but that had all happened long ago, before Perdita was born, and so she never remembered Whinworthy when it was awake and lived in.

But every time she went that way and found the gates open, she stopped to look at the little, lonely manor-house, and she often thought how nice it would be when it woke up and was a proper lived-in house again, with snapdragon and tiger-lilies in its garden, and candle-shine in its windows after dark.

The Rectory was long and rambling, with stone floors on which Tryphena strewed green rushes instead of a carpet, and steps up into rooms, and steps down into other rooms, and windows where you least expected them, and dark corners which might contain almost anything. There was a queer oak chest carved with grinning heads, that stood in the hall, and gay little posies embroidered on the green curtains of Perdita's bed and the green cover-lid which matched them; and a beautiful cup of Venetian glass as fine as a soap-bubble, which her mother kept wrapped up in her dower chest, and brought out only on special occasions, to be looked at, but *never* touched.

Then there was the garden. A big garden, with a little one full of sweet-smelling herbs in one corner, and a high red cob wall with thatch on top of it running all the way round. At the bottom of the garden there was a small, weather-stained door in the wall, and beyond it was the orchard, with Mazard cherry-trees, and a great old pear, and apple-trees with names that sing themselves in your head—russets, lilywhites, leatherjackets, golden pippins—and Cornish gillyflowers. And however much Perdita loved the things indoors, she loved the garden and the orchard even better, because of the fairies.

You see, Perdita was born just as the brass-faced clock in the Rector's study struck half-past eleven on Midsummer's Eve; and as everyone knows—or if they do not, they ought to—anyone born on Midsummer's Eve, especially towards midnight, will be sure to see fairies—at any rate until the day they get married, and perhaps all their lives.

So Perdita knew that the world was full of fairies (Pharisees, the country-folk called them), because she could see them just as clearly as you or I can see a dragon-fly. There were a lot of them in the garden: stately creatures with flame-coloured robes and shimmering golden wings, among the Crown Imperials; little naked Pharisees, green all over, with velvety purple patches on their wings, hiding in the foxglove bells; cuddly ones in the pansies and violets; fierce, gold-helmeted little warriors among the tiger-lilies; moth-winged creatures

clad in buff and grey and pink, clustering round the drooping honeysuckle. You could always find them, if you went softly so as not to frighten them, and knew where to look.

The Pharisees of the garden were tamer and much more reasonable, like their flowers, than those who lived on the other side of the red cob wall. But the wild Pharisees were more exciting than the garden ones, and when Perdita got to know them, they were staunch friends to her; though to other people—people who could not see them—well! They lived in the hills, in the great circles of gorse that grew amid the fields; they lived in Pidwidgeon Wood, and among the hazel-bushes down by the weir, and in a disused badger's holt far upstream. They were mostly greeny-grey in colour, with long, wild hair, and eyes as blue as speedwell or as yellow as broom; their wings were bright, like those of a dragon-fly, and their voices were like the churr of a grasshopper. In fact, when you hear a grasshopper churring among the clover flowers, it may quite likely be a Pharisee calling to a friend.

Of course people really knew that there were Pharisees in England when Queen Elizabeth was young. People talked about them in whispers round the fire on winter nights or in the summer twilight when the day's work was done. Sometimes they called them the Good Folk, or the Lordly Ones, and they put little bowls of milk outside the doors to keep them in a good humour. But they were so seldom seen that even then grown-up and

clever people were beginning to forget that the Pharisees were anything but old stories. So Perdita did not tell anyone about them, except her brother Robin, who she knew would not laugh at her. Besides, she had to tell Robin, because he had just told her his own secret, and it would not have been fair if she had not.

Robin had an uncle who was a Merchant Venturer, and was going to take Robin with him when he grew up. Everybody knew that. The secret was this: that Robin was not always going to serve in someone else's ship; one day he was going to have a ship of his own—a lovely, tall ship, with sails that swelled out like white wings, and a painted figure-head, and four culverin in the waist; and he was going to sail away in her, out beyond Lundy, away and away into the west, and do great deeds to the glory of Queen Elizabeth. And one day he meant to sail south, and then east round the Cape of Good Hope, and capture for England the trade with India which was now in the hands of the Portuguese. They were in the barn when Robin told her this, eating little withered apples; and Perdita listened so hard that she swallowed a pip and choked. But when she had stopped choking, she told Robin about the Pharisees; and Robin did *not* laugh at her, but only smiled his nice, slow smile, and said, 'Is there a Pharisee anywhere about now?'

At first Perdita did not think there was, but when she looked round carefully she saw that there

was a small one sitting on the edge of the cider-press. She told Robin exactly where it was, and he held out his finger to it—very gently, as though it was a mouse he was trying to make friends with.

At first the Pharisee fluttered its wings at a terrific rate, and Perdita thought for a moment that it was going to get into a rage. But gradually it calmed down, and at last it stepped delicately on to Robin's patient finger, and began to walk down it into the palm of his hand.

'I think I've got it—haven't I, Perdita?' he said, very quietly, so as not to disturb it.

'Yes,' said Perdita. 'It's in your hand. Oh, Robin, how did you know?'

'It tickles, like a bit of thistledown blowing across my hand.'

After that, Perdita often told Robin about the Pharisees, and in return he told her what he was going to do when he grew up and sailed away in the tall ship with the white sails and the painted figure-head and the four culverin in the waist; making a story out of it, which was just what she liked best.

Perdita loved stories, and was always wanting people to tell them to her. The five people of the Rectory household all told her stories, and all of them told quite different sorts of stories. Billie-the-Garden told her long, rambling ones while he dug manure into the strawberry bed or groomed the Rector's horse Linnet—about the days when he was a soldier and carried a halberd against King

Hal's enemies, and did not take his boots off for weeks together.

Tryphena told queer tales of the sort you try not to think about when you are in bed, and the candle is out, and the moonlight makes queer, misty patches in the corners: about the elder-tree in the weir meadow that had once been a witch, and bled if it were cut; and about the ghosts of the old monks from the ruined Abbey, who fished the river on moonlit nights; and about her sailor uncle, who had been overlooked by a witch and drowned on his next voyage because she had turned into a hare and made off before he could draw blood from her and so break the spell.

Robin's stories were all of the sea, and exploration, and adventure, either of what he was going to do, or of what other people had already done. Sometimes he told her about Anthony Jenkinson, who had travelled right up through the Turkish Empire in the year before Robin was born; how he had gone farther than any Englishman had ever gone before him, and seen the ancient glories of Bokhara and of Samarkand; and sometimes he told her about brave Sir Hugh Willoughby, who that same year had set out from London in the *Bona Esperanza*, with all his flags flying and his sailors dressed in sky-blue cloth, to find the North-East Passage to Russia. And he told how the *Bona Esperanza* had been frozen into the ice at the far north of Norway, and the food had all gone, and one by one the men had died

of cold and hunger, until only Sir Hugh Willoughby was left, and how he had sat in his cabin and written his journal, day by day, until he, too, died. Then Perdita would cry a little because, although she loved the story, she was so sorry for poor Sir Hugh, dying all alone in the great white emptiness. And even Robin's voice would grow a little husky, because Sir Hugh Willoughby was his hero.

When she asked her father for a story, he always smiled his slow, lop-sided smile that lifted only one side of his mouth, and said that he could not make up stories. Then he would put an arm round her and cuddle her against him, and tell her wonderful tales that came out of the two big leather-bound books in his study, which were called 'Le Morte D'Arthur' and 'The Canterbury Tales', stories about knights and ladies and priests and goblins, dragons and witches, kings and queens, and devils and enchanted maidens; all of which you can read for yourselves one day.

Perdita's mother told stories that usually began, 'When I was a little girl', or 'When your Uncle David was a little boy', and ended up with her or Uncle David, or both, being whipped and sent to bed without any supper; which all went to show that both of them had been very naughty when they were little, but had had a lot of fun. Sometimes, for a change, Perdita's mother told her about Great-Aunt Phoebe, whose forefathers had gone to Ireland four hundred years before, with Strongbow and his army of Barons, and stayed there ever since.

Great-Aunt Phoebe had married Great-Uncle Richard and come to live in London, and never stirred from the City again, though she had been a widow for fifty years now. She had swaggered down the Strand in her husband's doublet and hose for a wager, had Great-Aunt Phoebe. She had taken off her shoe at a Court ball and thrown it at the head of someone she did not like; and when she was a girl she could sing the heart out of your breast. She was an outrageous person, and Perdita loved hearing about her.

But there was one story her mother told that Perdita loved better than any other, and she asked for it so often that at last her mother made a rule, and would tell it to her only during the three winter months, and on her birthday. It was about how Bloody Queen Mary had died in her great Palace of Whitehall, and men who were called 'Queen's Messengers' had set out to carry the news through England. How they had ridden through the wintry countryside—for it was November—shouting the news as they passed through each village; and everywhere the church bells had rung after their passing, to welcome the Princess Elizabeth. One of them had ridden through Broomhill, and stopped to give Perdita's father his copy of the proclamation that was to be read in all the churches throughout England. Perdita's mother had been making candles, with one eye on Robin, who was only three, to see he did not get his fingers into the hot tallow, when she heard the horseman arrive. She always

said, in telling the story, that her heart stood still for a whole minute; for the Rector, like thousands of other men and women, did not agree with Queen Mary over a great many things, and Perdita's mother was afraid of anything unusual just then, in case it meant that the Queen was going to harm him. She had done such terrible things to so many of the people who did not agree with her. But in a little while the horseman had ridden on again, and the Rector had come in search of Perdita's mother, and told her that Queen Mary was dead, and the Princess Elizabeth was now Queen. Then he had sent word to Tommy, the captain of the bell-ringers, and in a little while Halsyon and Hautclere, Douce, John, and Gabriel had rung out over the village, calling all the people to church. And when they were gathered together, Perdita's father had gone into the pulpit, and proclaimed Queen Elizabeth, God bless her! And after the Broomhill bells were silent, and the startled rooks had returned to the elm-trees, they could hear the bells of Wear Abbott and the bells of St. Giles and the bells of Black Brendon ringing in the distance.

Sometimes when she was in bed Perdita used to think about the Queen Elizabeth story, going over it in her mind, because it made her feel all happy and excited inside, and the last thing she would think about before she went to sleep would be the church bells ringing all across green England, to welcome Gloriana.

II

HOW PERDITA WISHED TO SEE THE QUEEN

ON the morning of Perdita's eighth birthday she jumped out of bed very early, and ran barefoot across the rush-strewn floor, and stuck her head out of the window. She saw that it was going to be a lovely day. There had been rain in the night, but it was quite gone now, and the sky was as blue as a robin's egg, flecked with little curling, golden, feathery clouds; and the blue sky and its golden feathers were reflected in the puddles in 'Parson's Platt'. Everything was wet and sparkling in the sunshine, and the honeysuckle which started by the front door and climbed up towards Perdita's window held a great drop of rain in every crimson-tipped golden horn. There was a thrush singing in the churchyard elms, and a yellow-hammer sat on the topmost twig of the tallest oak in Five-Oak Spinney, and sang for a little bit of bread and *no* cheese. Perdita nodded to both of them; then she drew in her head, and sitting down on the edge of the bed began to pick the little bits of rush and rosemary from between her toes before putting on her clothes.

Everybody was particularly nice to Perdita, because it was her birthday. Her father gave her a tiny hand-mirror made of polished steel with a silver rim, and her mother had made her a new gown

for Jessica, her doll—a lovely gown of leaf-green, with melon-shaped sleeves, and a farthingale of palest pink embroidered with tiny rosebuds. Robin was away at school, but he had left a small, gaily-painted wooden box with his mother, to be a surprise for Perdita's birthday. Tryphena had baked her a gingerbread horse, with a man on its back, and both of them thick with gilding, and Billie gave her a frilly pink-and-white striped carnation in a pot—a little grudgingly, because he had grown it himself, and no gardener really likes giving away anything he has grown himself.

Every morning, birthday or no birthday, Perdita had to do lessons with her mother. She had to read a little bit of her horn-book, and do a sum, and write a copy; then she had to sew a fine seam (not a very long one) and add a little bit to her cross-stitch sampler, and practise for half an hour on the virginal—which was the great-great-grandmother of a piano—before she was free for the rest of the day.

However, Perdita did not particularly mind the horn-book and the plain seam, because of the sampler and virginal that came after, like cake after bread and butter. For the sampler was to have stiff little fir-trees, and strawberry plants in scarlet pots in the corners, and a zig-zag border of honeysuckle all the way round; and though there was the alphabet in the middle, there would be green and pink popinjays perching on nothing-in-particular, and two little black dogs, and a galleon in full sail—Robin's galleon!

But lovely as the sampler was, the virginal was even lovelier; its ivory keys were yellow with age—as yellow as the outer petals of a daffodil—and felt smooth and almost soft under Perdita's fingers, and when she had got through her scales, her mother would play little simple tunes, and then let her try to pick them out for herself—even if only with one finger; and Perdita loved the tinkly sound that the keys of the virginal made when her mother's fingers moved over them.

That day Perdita's mother played a new tune—a lovely tune—called 'Greensleeves'. Perhaps you know it? People still hum and whistle it to this day, because it is one of the loveliest tunes that was ever made, and things as lovely as that go on for ever. But though it was new to Perdita, it was really quite old already, for her mother said she remembered everyone singing it in London Town when she was a little girl, long before she married Perdita's father and came to live in Devonshire, and it had not been new then. She said that some people believed that King Hal had made it, words and music, too, perhaps for the Lady Anne Boleyn, who was Queen Elizabeth's mother, before he stopped loving her.

Afterwards Perdita wandered out into the garden, with Jessica in her shabby old gown under one arm and the new green gown and the painted box under the other, and her mirror in her hand, and Peterkin paddling along on his short legs behind her. She took them all half-way down the garden,

and settled herself on the grass plot in the shade of the old, crooked mulberry-tree. First of all she looked long and carefully into the mirror. She had often seen herself in the big, polished steel mirror in her mother's room, and in the copper pans in the kitchen, and in the dark pool above the weir; but there was something different, something extra special, about looking at herself in a mirror that was her own and nobody else's. It was like a little silver pool between her two hands; and at first it only reflected the leaves of the mulberry-tree dappled with golden sunshine, but when she tipped it a little, suddenly her own face was in the middle of it—a small, brown-skinned, pointed face, fluffy brown hair under a trim little coif, and eyes like two speedwell flowers, so blue that it did not seem quite possible that they could belong to such a little brown mouse. Whenever Perdita thought about such things, she wished that she was like her mother, because her mother was beautiful, with a wild-rose flush in her cheeks, and a dusting of golden freckles across her nose, and hair that was neither brown nor golden, but a colour between the two, like the woods in October. When Perdita mentioned this to Tryphena, Tryphena said, 'Handsome is as handsome does. You be a good li'l maid, and your looks won't matter.' But that did not comfort Perdita at all, because she was sure that beautiful people generally had more fun than good ones.

But somehow to-day she did not mind the least

little bit. So, after studying her reflection gravely, she put out her small pink tongue at it, and showed Peterkin his reflection instead. But Peterkin was not interested, and pretended he had an itch behind his ear; so Perdita laid the mirror down on the grass, and began to take off Jessica's old gown. Jessica was made of wood, and had no joints—only modern dolls have joints—and there were tooth-marks on her wooden stomach where Peterkin had once mistaken her for a bone; but her cheeks were beautifully pink, and her mouth beautifully red, and her painted hair as black as a rook's wing; and Perdita thought that she was very lovely.

But if she was beautiful in her old gown of pease-porridge tawny, she was far more so when dressed in the new green kirtle and the pink farthingale with the embroidered rosebuds; so Perdita propped her up against the tree-trunk, and showed her her reflection in the mirror.

And all the time Perdita was humming little bits of 'Greensleeves', little bits of the tune, and little bits of the words:

> 'For Greensleeves was all my joy
> And Greensleeves was my delight;
> Greensleeves was my heart-of-gold,
> And who but my Lady Greensleeves?'

She was sure that King Hal *must* have made it for Queen Elizabeth's mother, before he stopped loving her. And whether it was because of that, or because of the things that happened later, Gloriana and My Lady Greensleeves got linked

together in her head, so that ever afterwards, if she heard 'Greensleeves', she thought of the Queen, and if she thought about the Queen, the tune of Greensleeves began to sing itself inside her.

All through that day there were even fewer Pharisees to be seen than usual—and there never were very many. Perdita did find one curled up in a foxglove bell, and once she thought she saw another fluttering among the branches of the mulberry-tree, but it disappeared before she could be sure that it was not just a dancing sunbeam, which was disappointing. Still, the gingerbread man which she had with her supper (saving the horse for next day) made up for the absence of quite a lot of Pharisees; and afterwards her mother told her the Queen Elizabeth story, before she went to bed.

Being Midsummer's Eve, it was light for quite a long while after Perdita's bed-time; and she lay watching the golden patch of evening sunshine slanting farther and farther up the wall, and getting more and more red as sunset drew nearer. She was too excited to sleep, and began to count the embroidered knots of flowers on the green bed-curtains, until they seemed to move a little, as though they were coming to life. The pink-and-white carnation on the window-sill seemed to be standing on tiptoe, and holding its petals widely open so as not to miss anything; and Jessica, propped against the foot of the bed, was smiling to herself as though she knew a secret that nobody else knew. Perdita began to be sure that something

was going to happen—something queer, that could happen only on Midsummer's Eve.

A long time went by. The sunshine died away, and blue shadows hung like cobwebs in the corners of Perdita's little room. The embroidered posies on the curtains grew dim, the blackbird in the mulberry-tree stopped singing, and in his place an owl hooted softly from Five-Oak Spinney, 'Whoo-whoo, whoo-whoo'. The sky outside the window turned to a clear, lovely green, like a witch-ball. Then the full midsummer moon came swimming up over the tree-tops, and with the moon came the Pharisees.

The first that Perdita heard of them was a faint, dry rustling, like autumn leaves against her window. She sat up in bed and listened. For a moment everything was quiet, and then it began again; only this time it was louder, like tiny wings beating against the glass—moth wings or butterfly wings—and there was a tiny outcry, like the churring of many grasshoppers, but not so loud. Perdita slipped out of bed, padded across to the window, and, opening it, leaned out. The world outside was alive with Pharisees! They clung to the horns of the honeysuckle and clustered on the window-sill, and hovered up and down in the air, like a cloud of midges before a thunderstorm, their wings pearly in the moonlight, their eyes shining like jewels, just as the eyes of a night moth shine when the light catches them. Wild Pharisees and garden Pharisees, mingling together, and all crying in their little, shrill voices, 'Perdita! Perdita!'

'Here I am,' said Perdita. 'What do you want?'

'We want to give you a present,' came the answer.

'Oh!' exclaimed Perdita. 'How lovely! What is it?'

'A wish,' chorused the Pharisees. 'One wish, all to yourself: gold from the moon, or a farthingale of scarlet satin—a king to wed you—a white lilac-tree for your garden—a new story for every day of the year—anything your heart desires.'

'Oh!' said Perdita again, and then, screwing up her eyes, 'I wish—I wish——'

'No, *no*!' cried the Pharisees. 'Not here. Come with us. Come away up the Broomhill; come and wish on the Grey Maiden.'

Now, Perdita knew quite well the tall grey stone that people called the 'Grey Maiden'. It stood up like a pointing finger on the very top of the Broomhill, with a bush of blackthorn beside it; but she had never heard that it had any magic in it, so she said, 'Why the Grey Maiden?'

'People *always* wished on the Grey Maiden before the world got so forgetful,' said a tall Pharisee with peat-brown wings folded down his back. 'Come, Perdita, *do* come!' and 'Oh yes, *do* come!' cried the other Pharisees, hovering up and down faster than ever, and holding out their hands to her.

'Wait for me,' said Perdita. 'I won't be long. Wait for me by the back door.'

She pulled her cloak over her white night-rail,

and leaving her door just a little open, as her mother always left it, ran down the curling stairway, her bare feet making little, soft, pitter-pattering sounds on the polished wood. There was a thin line of yellow candle-light under the parlour door, and her mother's soft laugh sounded behind it as Perdita stole past. Tryphena and Billie were in their home over the stables long ago, and the kitchen was in darkness. Perdita felt for the key which always hung on the wall, and, opening the door, slipped through and closed it behind her, putting the key on the window-sill—for she was a sensible person, and Pharisees or no Pharisees, she did not intend to find herself locked out.

Next moment the Pharisees came round the corner of the house, and fluttered about her with chirping cries of welcome. They caught hold of her cloak with tiny hands that clung like brambles, and pulled her out into the moonlight. She went with them gladly, across the lawn, through the tangle of hollyhocks and guelder-rose at the bottom of the garden, and, opening the little door in the wall, danced out through the orchard and down to the river meadow beyond.

The sheep-nibbled turf was like cold, wet velvet under her feet, but the air was warm and full of the scent of honeysuckle; and clear over the tree-tops rode the great, round, midsummer moon, flooding the world with light. Perdita had never noticed before how much of gold there is in summer moon shine; not silver at all, really, but a wonderful pale

silvery gold, like the colour of evening primroses. She would have liked to stand still for a moment and look at it; but the Pharisees were all round her, tugging at her cloak, her night-rail, and even at her hair, and she had to hurry on across the meadow and through the coppice where the wild cherry-trees grew. Then she was climbing the Broomhill, half running, her heart thudding with excitement, the Good Folk whirling round her.

The Broomhill was steep; great patches of gorse taller than a man grew on it, so that often she had to turn out of her way, and when she reached the top she was quite out of breath. But there was the Grey Maiden standing up all a-shimmer in the moonlight, as though waiting for her.

The Pharisees cried with great excitement, 'See! Here she is, the Grey Maiden! Put your hands on either side of her, and wait while your heart beats seven times. Then say, "Oh, Grey Maiden, hearken to a maiden's wish"; and whatever you wish for, it shall come to pass within a twelve-month and a day.'

Like a thousand tiny brambles caught in her garments and hair, they urged her forward, right up to the Grey Maiden. 'Now!' they cried, 'now! Do it as we told you!'

'Yes, yes,' said Perdita, and she put her hands on either side of the Grey Maiden.

The granite was cold against her fingers, and suddenly everything was very quiet; the Pharisees

had ceased their whirling flight and settled on every twig of the thorn tree above her, where their eyes shone like stars tangled among the thorns. Far, far to the west, the moonlight sparkled on the waters of Bideford Bay, with its wide, curved fringe of incoming Atlantic rollers, and Lundy floating like a dark shadow far out on the skyline. Far, far below, the world lay quiet in the moonshine, black woods and misty fields, and huddled cottages where people would be going to bed by the friendly glow of rushlights; but up on the crest of the Broomhill there was just the Grey Maiden, and the moon, and the Pharisees.

Perdita's heart beat one, two, three, four: there was magic in the tall stone; she could feel it like pins and needles, against her finger-tips, and her heart beat five, six, very quickly. The stone seemed to stir, like a real maiden awaking. Perdita's heart beat seven, right up in her throat, but she never doubted what she was going to wish for. She said, 'Oh, Grey Maiden, hearken to a maiden's wish. I wish to see the Queen Elizabeth. I wish to see her so close I could put out my hand and touch her.'

Then the Pharisees were whirling round her like moths round a candle-flame, and she turned about and saw through the fluttering cloud of wings a tiny square of smoky saffron far below her, that she knew was the parlour window at home. And she began to run towards it, with her hair and her cloak blowing out behind her, and the Pharisees whirling

closer and closer round her until she was dazzled and made giddy by the flicker of their wings.

Perdita never remembered getting home, but suddenly she was lying in her own little bed, with the moon shining in through the window, and her mother and father talking quietly in the next room while they got ready for bed.

Some people would say it was all a dream, but when Perdita came to get up on midsummer morning, something pricked her between the toes; and when she looked to see what it was, she found a furze-prickle stuck there!

III

ST. MARGARET'S FAIR

PERDITA did not tell anyone about her wish, because she knew that if you tell a wish before it comes true, it never *will* come true. But she thought about it a lot.

She was thinking about it in the still-room one day about a month later, while she helped her mother to make pot-pourri. Every summer Perdita's mother gathered the scented blossoms from the garden, and mixed their petals with spices, to smell sweet in her blue bow-pots all through the winter; and this year, for the first time, Perdita was being allowed to help her.

Perdita loved the still-room. It was a large, dim room, set three steps below the level of the garden; and all round the walls, on deep shelves, were hundreds and hundreds of things that her mother and Tryphena had made, or dried, or distilled: tallow candles for everyday use, and candles of white honey-bee wax for special occasions; delicately scented soap in wooden bowls; huge crocks of run-honey; pottery jars of spices, preserves, and dried fruits; jams and conserves; elderberry wine and cherry-brandy; and such things as elder-flower water to cure freckles, and celandine paste for sore eyes, and wormwood for dosing people

who had over-eaten themselves. And hanging from hooks in the ceiling were bundles of sweet-smelling herbs, and pumpkins dried to great golden globes, and green herb-cheeses in nets of fine white linen.

In the middle of the room was a wooden table, scrubbed as white as milk; and on this Perdita and her mother had laid the flowers they had picked early that morning, before the sun got too hot. York-and-Lancaster roses, dark-scented clove carnations, long blue spikes of lavender, sprigs of rosemary and verbena, and many other sweet-smelling things.

At one end of the table, Perdita, with a large apron tied round her middle, was stripping the petals from the flowers and putting the bare stalks tidily back into the big, flat basket. At the other end of the table her mother was mixing all the petals together and putting them, with layers of salt and cloves and orris root, into the jars ranged in front of her—the fine blue bow-pots for the parlour, the painted pottery bowl for the dining-parlour, the fat jar of green English glass to stand on the Rector's desk. Under the table, Peterkin was biting his paw, with little snufflings, pretending he had got something stuck between his toes. It was a contented sort of snuffling, though, almost as contented as the sleepy droning of a brown velvet bee among the flowers on the table. The flower petals and the spices smelled lovely, and Perdita stripped away contentedly, dreaming of the time when she would see the Queen's Grace.

Suddenly Mistress Pettle said, 'Sweetheart, would you like to go with Robin to St. Margaret's Fair next week?'

Perdita came out of her dream with a jerk. 'Oh!' she said, and stood quite still, staring at her mother, with her eyes and mouth wide open.

St. Margaret's Fair, which was held at Bideford towards the end of July, was one of the great events of the year. It went on for five days, and people travelled in to visit it from all over the countryside. Perdita had never been to it, because she was too little; but Robin went every year, and brought her back gilt gingerbread and peppermint fairings, and wonderful tales of the things he had seen: the bears on leashes, the gay booths, the cudgel play, and the strange merchants (for in those days fairs were not at all as they are nowadays; and at the great yearly gatherings people bought and sold weapons from Toledo, fine horses, bales of raw wool, Venetian glass, and silks from beyond Persia; and sometimes even black slaves).

So you can hardly wonder that Perdita had no breath to say anything but 'Oh!'

'You would?' asked her mother.

'*Please!*' said Perdita, twisting her hands in her kirtle, as she always did when she wanted anything very badly.

Her mother laughed, but nicely, and said, 'Then you shall, now that you are such a big maid!'

'Does Robin know?' Perdita asked anxiously, because she knew that elder brothers did not always

want their little sisters with them (Tryphena had told her that, one day last year when she had wanted to go fishing with Robin, and she had not forgotten). And Robin was almost grown-up—he was fourteen, and in those days people really *were* nearly grown up at fourteen.

But her mother said in her nicest, warmest voice, 'It was Robin's idea.'

So *that* was all right!

The time went by so slowly that Perdita thought the Fair day would never come. But it came at last, and Robin took her up behind him on Tansie, his stout bay pony, and told her to hold fast to his belt; and then they were off.

It was a lovely day. The sun shone like a great yellow dandelion in the blue sky, cuckoos called from the woodland shadows, and larks sang high overhead. The wheat-fields were beginning to change from green to gold, honeysuckle and yellow loosestrife starred the hedges, and blue scabious flowers swayed in the little breeze, nodding to the two of them as they rode by; and the dust of the deeply rutted lane rose in billowing white clouds behind them.

All the world was gay and brightly coloured and happy. Perdita was happy; Robin was happy; so they lifted up their voices and sang:

'Greensleeves, now fare thee well, adieu,
God I pray to prosper thee;
For I am still thy lover true,
Come once again, and love me.

For Greensleeves was all my joy,
And Greensleeves was my delight;
Greensleeves was my heart-of-gold,
And who but my Lady Greensleeves?'

Even Tansie was in holiday mood, and seemed to like their singing; for she shook her head and twitched her ears, and tittupped along the road like a fine lady herself.

As they drew near to Bideford they found themselves among a lot of other people, a-foot and on horseback and in country carts, all in their holiday clothes, and all going in the same direction. These people shouted to each other, laughing and merry; some of them called to Robin, giving him 'Good-day', and Robin called blithely back. As they came down the long hill towards the town, Perdita began to hear a muddled, murmuring noise like a great hive of bees, coming faintly across the water from the meadow where the Fair was going on. It grew louder and louder, until she could hear that it was made up of dogs barking, horses neighing, bagpipes playing, human voices laughing, crying, singing, shouting and quarrelling, bells ringing, drums beating, and every other kind of noise that a big crowd enjoying itself can possibly make.

Down to the bottom of the hill rode Robin, with Perdita behind him, and then across the Long Bridge. When they reached the Quay on the farther side he rode straight into the stable yard of the Mermaid Inn, lifted his sister down, and handed Tansie over to the care of the stable-man.

Then he took Perdita's hand, and together they sallied forth.

Bideford Quay was a wonderful place; and at any other time Robin, and even Perdita, would not have wanted to do anything else with their holiday than spend it wandering there, exploring the dark corners of the rope-walks and sail-lofts, watching the shipping in the Pool, and listening entranced to the talk of the merchant-folk and seamen. But the music of the Fair called to them, and they turned their backs on the Quay, with its smell of pitch, and its shipping in the Pool, and its mariners with gold rings in their ears, and set off towards the meadow above the town.

To Perdita, the Fair-ground seemed as big as another town; it was all laid out in streets like a town, too, with sideshows and booths on either side, instead of houses, and trampled turf between, instead of cobbles, and open spaces here and there, and gay holiday crowds everywhere.

They had scarcely got well into the crowd when Adam Hilyarde came swooping out on them from between a spice stall and a fortune-teller's booth. Perdita knew him slightly, of course, because of his going to school with Robin and being his friend, and because of the little lonely manor-house that was waiting for him to come and live in it. She saw him sometimes in the holidays, for he and Robin always spent a good deal of their time together; but she was a little shy of him, all the same. He was so different from Robin. He was slight and quick

and dark, as Robin was big and slow and golden: black as a gipsy, Tryphena said he was. When he was in earnest about anything he talked so fast that he stuttered. He had a crooked foot that gave him an ugly, broken-winged sort of walk, though he never seemed to let it interfere with him at all; and a way of throwing back his head and looking at people downwards, half laughing, that always made Perdita feel uncomfortable. More often than not, he carried a hawk on his fist—a big goshawk called Bathsheba, with savage, amber eyes that stared right through you as though she hated you. And that made Perdita feel uncomfortable, too. So when she saw him shouldering his way through the crowd towards them (even though he had not got Bathsheba with him to-day) she dropped back behind Robin, and hoped that he would not notice her.

'Robin!' he hailed. 'You're in the nick of time, old lad! There's a football match down the meadow bottom, and the country lads outnumbered three to one. Let's go and join in.'

Robin laughed and pulled Perdita forward. 'Can't to-day. Do you not see we have a lady present?'

So Perdita spread her blue skirts and dropped a bobbing curtsey, and Adam swept her a low bow, very grand and stately, just as though she were a great lady; but she was sure he was laughing at her.

After that the three of them went on together,

up one bright alley-way and down another, plunging deeper and deeper into the noisy, glowing heart of the Fair-ground. And somehow the Fair Day magic melted Perdita's shyness quite away, so that when she next thought about it, she found that she was not shy of Adam any more, which was nice.

The two boys took her to see the football match, which looked to her more like a free fight than a game, and bought her gilt gingerbread and many-coloured lozenges and a kerchief of crimson silk (though she had a silver sixpence of her own to spend, as she told them several times). They showed her booths full of country pottery and cheap jewellery and little tasselled falcon's hoods and all manner of things to eat, and woolly lambs with tin legs and bright golden spangles on their fleeces. They took her to an open space where a big brown bear was dancing on his hind legs in a ponderous sort of way, to the music of a pipe and tabor played by two cheerful vagabonds.

The yellow sunshine that lay over everything was like the enchantment of the Fair made visible, so that Perdita could see it as well as feel it dancing inside her. Everywhere she looked she saw purple and emerald and poppy-red—the whole world seemed awash with colour: colour on the striped awnings of the booths, colour in the swaying crowds; for townsfolk and country folk alike had donned their brightest and gaudiest attire, and farthingales of crimson and sapphire and daffodil yellow, and doublets of scarlet and purple thronged up and

down the green alley-ways, almost dimming the colours of the gipsy girls with their poppy-red head-kerchiefs and their lithe, dark menfolk, whose legs were cross gartered in scarlet, purple and emerald-green.

Through this enchanted realm of noise and colour the three wandered on and on, pausing to look at this and that, jostled by the crowd, and jostling back in return, until Perdita's head began to go round and round like a top, and jugglers and bears and Aunt Sallies, archery butts and ballad singers, fortune-tellers, fat ladies and two-headed calves all got mixed up together into a sort of pattern.

At last, when the sun was high overhead, and they were all three very hungry, they bought pasties and tarts, and followed the river until they had left the Fair-ground and its crowds far behind them, and found a little backwater, whose bank looked as though it would be a good place to eat their dinner. It was a nice backwater, with hazel and alder-bushes hanging over it, and water forget-me-nots as blue as Perdita's dress and her eyes. They all sat down on the bank in a row, with Perdita in the middle, and shared out their provisions. At first the boys talked to each other above her head, but when the food was all gone (and Perdita had eaten more than her share, while the other two were talking) they remembered her again. Robin found her a froglet among the clover-grass, and carefully damped his hands and caught it and held it up for her to see, speckly and topaz-eyed

and tiny, sitting quite contentedly on his thumb. Then he let it go again; and Adam made her a tiny pipe from an elder stem, and showed her how to play it.

After a time Robin said he wanted to go and buy a dagger. Adam had a little bright Spanish dagger with a point like a needle which he always wore slotted through his belt, and Robin had been saving up for nearly a year to buy one like it. So back to the Fair-ground they all went, but this time to the part where the real business of the Fair was transacted, where strange merchants came to buy and sell. Here the different trades were carried on in different streets: a street of saddlers and leather-workers; a street of fur traders; a street of goldsmiths; a street of silversmiths; a rather stuffy-smelling street full of heavy cloths and kersies and bales of wool; a street of silk merchants gay as a rainbow with damasks and silks and red Genoese velvets.

There were such crowds of people everywhere that it took them a little time to discover where the armourers and swordsmiths did their trade; but at last they found themselves in a narrow way between tents and booths set very close together. Casually displayed outside each booth was a damascened helmet, or a silver-hilted sword hanging with its dagger in silken slings, or a pair of wonderfully jointed and engraved gauntlets of blue steel—just enough to make you long to see what other treasures were inside.

The three walked slowly up and down the full length of the street of armourers, while Robin and Adam carefully examined the pieces of armour and weapons outside the booths. It was very important to choose the right swordsmith to visit—one whose work was good, because a bad dagger was worse than no dagger at all; yet not too expensive, because Robin had not very much money. Finally he decided on a little dark man who sat in the opening of his tent, with a slender, lovely rapier across his leather-aproned knees.

Robin asked him if he had any good daggers for sale, and told him how many shillings he could pay for one; and the little man looked at him with his head on one side, like a bright-eyed blackbird, and then, getting off his stool, led the way into the tent. It was rather dark and very hot inside the tent, and smelled of oil and polishing cloths and metal, but Perdita liked it; she liked the daggers which the little swordsmith brought out, too, and stood with her chin almost hooked over Robin's forearm, while he and Adam tested them.

It took some time to do. One was too long and one was too short, one was too rigid and one too small in the grip, and in several others the balance was not quite what Robin thought it should be. But at last he chose one, slender and needle-pointed as Adam's, with a chiselled Tudor Rose for a pummel, and stuck it into his belt. Then he paid over his savings into the horny palm of the little man, who flung the coins up in the air and caught

them again, saying, ''Tis a real good dagger you've got there, young master!'

Then they all thanked him politely, and went out again, back to the part of the Fair where the side-shows and trinket stalls and dancing bears were to be found.

Soon afterwards adventure befell them. They had been watching a juggler in pied red and yellow rags, juggling with flowers and coloured balls, and daggers as sharp and bright as the one Robin had just bought; and were edging their way through the crowd in search of something else to watch, when they heard a shrill whimper, close at hand. Robin, who was in front, stopped so suddenly that Perdita bumped into him, and they all three stood listening. The whimpering seemed to come from behind a red-and-green-striped booth just beside them. It sounded like a puppy.

'Come on!' said Robin sharply, and began to edge his way between the booth and a gaily painted tilt-cart. Perdita followed so closely that she trod on his heels at every other step, and Adam brought up the rear.

There was a little open space behind the booth, with the backs of other booths all round it, and in the middle of it squatted a big, gipsy-looking boy with ragged black hair falling over his dirty face. In front of him was a tiny, half-starved puppy, and as the three watched, he held out a scrap of meat towards it; then, as it bundled forward, he snatched the meat away, and cuffed the poor little

creature sharply with the flat of his hand, laughing as it rolled over and began to whimper again.

'Stop that!' said Robin, quietly, in exactly the voice the Rector used when he was angry.

The boy looked up, scowling, and reaching out, cuffed the puppy again—hard.

'Stop that!' repeated Robin, and took a step forward.

'It's my puppy,' said the boy. 'I can do what I like with my own.'

'If it's your puppy, I'll fight you for it. Get up!'

'Nay, now, young master; what be a puppy to the likes of you? You leave the poor folk be.'

'Get up!' Robin said, slowly and distinctly, clenching his fists; and the boy put up an arm quickly to shield his head, and scrambled to his feet in a hurry.

All this while Perdita had been standing with her mouth and eyes wide open; but when Robin and the gipsy suddenly became a whirling mass of arms and legs, she dashed forward to rescue the puppy, lest he should be trampled on. Adam dived after her, grabbed her and the puppy, and hauled them both out from under the feet of the battle.

'You stay with me,' he said, setting Perdita down against the canvas wall, and putting the little creature into her arms.

'Oh!' gasped Perdita, breathless and rather frightened. 'Please—aren't you going to help Robin?'

Adam glanced down at her. 'Two to one would not be fair,' he pointed out. 'Don't worry, little maid. Robin can handle that lout. If he can't, I'll go in too, and we'll murder him between us.'

He sounded so matter-of-fact that Perdita was comforted. She stood quietly cuddling the puppy and looking on; and the pup squeaked a little, and thrust his poor, wuffly nose against her, and went to sleep. It was a dreadful fight; but in a short while she began to enjoy it, especially when she realized that most of the blood was the other boy's.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it was all over. The gipsy was lying flat on his back, staring straight upwards in a rather dazed sort of way, and Robin was standing over him, dabbing at his nose with a handkerchief that was growing redder and redder with every dab.

'Oh, Robin!' cried Perdita. 'Your nose!'

'It's all right,' answered Robin, in a muffled voice. 'No great harm done, but I think I'll go and bleed a bit down by the river before we go home.'

'Are you sure you are all right?' asked Adam. 'You look a bit green.'

But Robin only laughed and shook his head, and dabbed at his nose again. 'Lend me a silver piece, old lad.'

Adam felt in the breast of his doublet, and produced a crown. 'Here you are; it's the last I've got.'

Robin said 'Thanks,' in a still more muffled

voice, and taking it from him dropped it on the grass beside the gipsy boy, who still lay staring straight upward in the same dazed sort of way. 'You might take Perdita and the puppy up to the Mermaid, and see about having Tansie saddled up,' he added.

'All right; we'll wait for you in the stable yard.' And taking hold of Perdita's free hand, Adam led her firmly away. 'Come along, li'l maiden,' he commanded; and Perdita came obediently, though she did look back once rather anxiously at Robin, who was already making his way in the direction of the river.

Adam limped quickly through the crowded Fair-ground, and Perdita trotted beside him, cuddling the puppy against her. He did not speak to her much, but his tight hold on her hand was very comforting, and she decided more and more that she had made a mistake about being shy of Adam Hilyarde.

When Robin had finished bleeding down by the river, and made his way up to the Mermaid, he found the other two sitting on the edge of the horse trough, Adam with his arm round Perdita to keep her from falling in; and the puppy (his inside full of warm milk which the innkeeper's kindly wife had given him) fast asleep in the little girl's lap. Tansie was ready saddled and standing near, with her reins tossed over the hitching-post.

'How's your nose?' called Adam, as soon as he appeared.

'Look at it,' said Robin.

The other two looked. It was rapidly swelling to twice its usual size, and turning the most peculiar colour.

'Oh, *poor* Robin!' cried Perdita the soft-hearted. 'Does it hurt?'

'Of course it hurts,' said Robin, not crossly, just stating a fact.

And Adam laughed and got up from the horse-trough, lifting Perdita down beside him.

'You had better go on home now. How are you going to manage the pup?'

Robin said, 'I think I had better take Perdita on my saddle-bow, then she'll have both hands free, and can have the pup on her lap.' And he mounted into the saddle, and brought Tansie's head round towards the gateway.

Adam lifted Perdita up to him, and then gave her the puppy, who was still sound asleep.

'You're not riding with us, I suppose?' Robin asked, for the road to Black Brendon was the same as the road to Broomhill for three-quarters of the way.

The other shook his head. 'No. I'll be going back to the Fair for a bit. My lady aunt has visitors, and I am best out of the way. Good-bye, old lad; I'll be over one day next week. Good-bye, Perdita.'

'Till next week, then. I'll pay you back the crown as soon as I can,' said Robin.

And Perdita leaned down from her perch on the

saddle-bow, being careful not to disturb the puppy, and said in a little rush, 'Good-bye, Adam. Please, it was a lovely day.'

Then Robin struck his heel in Tansie's stout flank, and they were out through the gateway of the Mermaid, and trotting up the Quay towards the Long Bridge. Perdita looked back, and waved to Adam, who was standing in the gateway, and he swept her a low bow in return.

Across the bridge they went, and up the long hill beyond, and out on to the open country road again. People had not yet begun to leave the Fair, and the dusty lanes were almost empty. The shadows of the day's end were beginning to lengthen across the fields, and there was a lovely evening coolness in the air as they rode home like conquering heroes, singing made-up songs in praise of themselves all the way.

As they drew near home they became a little anxious, and stopped singing, for they wondered what effect their day's exploits, with Robin's nose and the presence of the peacefully sleeping puppy, would have on their parents. Tansie was tired, too, and slackened her trot to a comfortable amble as they turned into the familiar village street.

Perdita said, 'I wonder what Mother will say.'

And Robin said, 'Yes, so do I.' Then, as they rounded the corner of the church into Parson's Platt, 'Look! There *is* Mother!'

Mistress Pettle was standing in the Rectory doorway, and as soon as she saw them she kilted up her

farthingale and came running like a winged thing, with her sunny hair escaping in little wisps and tendrils from beneath her coif, as it always did in moments of stress and excitement. 'Have you had a nice day, my darlings?' she called; and then, as Robin reined in beside her, her face changed, and she cried out in a little scolding voice, as though he were four instead of fourteen, 'Robin, your face! You have been fighting, you naughty poppet!'

Robin said, 'Yes, Mother!' and slid from the saddle, lifting Perdita and the puppy down after him.

Perdita ran to her mother at once, with the pup still in her arms, and began to pour out the whole story; and the puppy woke up and began to whimper because he was hungry again. Then somehow they were all in the stable-yard, and Robin was explaining to his mother, and Mistress Pettle was still trying to scold, but as though her heart was not really in the scolding; and suddenly she laughed, and said, 'It was very wicked of you to fight the boy, but since you did—I'm so glad you beat him.'

Then Billie came out of the harness-room to take charge of Tansie and rub her down, and Tryphena poked her head through the kitchen window, and Peterkin came barking round them all, half wild with excitement, and the stable-yard seemed very full of people. Then suddenly Perdita's father was standing there, looking on with one eyebrow cocked inquiringly.

The noise and laughter died away, and everybody looked at him anxiously, especially Robin, who was desperately afraid that his father would not let him keep the puppy.

The Rector said, 'Well, Robin. Suppose you tell me what all this means.'

Robin swallowed hard and began to tell him; and Perdita set the puppy down, and stood twisting her hands in the folds of her kirtle and gazing beseechingly at her father. But it was the puppy who really settled the whole thing. It sneezed, waddled across to the Rector, and rolled over at his feet, wriggling, and waving all four paws in the air; and the Rector bent down and gently rubbed its small pink stomach.

'And so we brought him home,' Robin was saying. 'And please, Father, may we keep him?'

The Rector looked at his family's anxious faces, and the tiny, half-starved, dirty puppy, and said, 'I don't see why not, as you won him in fair fight—especially as you paid for him as well, even if it was with Adam's money!'

Everybody heaved sighs of relief; and Perdita's mother picked up the puppy and carried it indoors, followed by her husband and children.

They set the tiny creature down before the fire in the kitchen, and Peterkin smelled him all over, very carefully, in a pleased sort of way.

'Look! Peterkin likes him,' said Perdita.

'He needs washing,' said Perdita's mother.

'Please, not to-day,' pleaded Perdita. 'He's had a very trying day, and he's so tired.'

So they decided to put off washing him until to-morrow; but they felt that he should have a name at once, so they discussed the matter while he lapped up more warm milk with a little bread in it. They decided to call him Bran, after Fingal's great hound of ancient legend, Bran the White-breasted—because he had a grubby-white patch on his tiny chest, and looked as though he might be going to be some sort of a hound one day. But Bran did not seem to care in the least about his name, and curled up against Peterkin, and went to sleep as soon as the warm milk was safely inside him.

It had been a very important day, Perdita decided, before she went to sleep that night; what with adding Bran to the household, and finding out about Adam Hilyarde being nice—a most important day.

IV

STORY BY CANDLE-LIGHT

AUTUMN came, and the leaves of Pidwidgeon Wood turned golden and then brown, and went sailing down the wind, leaving the trees barer with every day that passed. The blackberries were over, and the hedges were gay with scarlet hips, bright garlands of bryony, and honeysuckle berries. Billie had bonfire after bonfire at the bottom of the garden, burning hedge-clippings and fallen leaves and brambles, so that the whole world seemed full of blue, sweet-smelling wood-smoke. When it was fine, the fields were grey with hoar frost in the mornings, and when it rained, it did so with a hurly-burly wind-and-coldness that made summer seem far away.

The darkness closed in early now, and when supper was over (people supped at six o'clock in those days) and the long, firelit evening lay ahead, that was the time that Perdita loved best of all the day.

One evening in late October a great wind arose, and there were fallen trees across the roads, and hay-ricks scattered all over the countryside, so that for many and many years afterwards people spoke of the Great Gale; and whenever Perdita heard it spoken of, even when she was an old woman, she always thought of the tale of Sir

Gawaine and the Loathly Lady, because it was on that night that her father first told it to her.

They were sitting close together in the parlour, as people do when there is storm and tempest out of doors. Perdita sat on her little stool before the fire, with Jessica in her lap, listening to the raging of the wind and the crackling of the flames, and loving the feel of warmth and shelter and being indoors safe from the storm which dashed itself against the old, sturdy walls of the Rectory, and sent the rain dashing against the windows, trickling down the glass and catching the light of the candles so that the window-panes looked as though they were streaked with liquid silver—loving it even when it drove the stinging smoke down the chimney and made her cough and rub her smarting eyes.

The Rector sat in his own particular chair on one side of the hearth, reading a shabby brown leather book which he had lately bought at a sale, and at the other side of the hearth sat Perdita's mother, in *her* particular chair. Mistress Pettle was working knots of flowers on pale yellow tabby, for her best farthingale. On a table beside her stood a candle, carefully arranged behind a bowl of water. The bowl caught the candle-light and focused it into a round patch of silvery radiance on her work, so that she could see to do the fine stitches. There were pansies in the design, and strawberry flowers and Mary-buds and little white clove carnations.

On the green rushes before the fire Bran and Peterkin sprawled, with their stomachs towards the

warmth. Peterkin slept quietly, but Bran (who was now fat and strong and four months old, and growing as fast as ever he knew how) was dreaming of rabbits, and his paws twitched and his ears fluttered, and from time to time he gave shrill puppy whines in his sleep.

Everything was very warm and cosy and sheltered; sometimes the Rector turned over a page, and sometimes Perdita's mother took another strand of silk from the many-coloured pile beside her; and Perdita began to feel that she would like a story. So she edged her stool little by little over to her father's side of the hearth, and put her arm round the calf of his nearest leg under his long black gown, and began to rub her face up and down against his knee.

For a while he took no notice, but as Perdita went on rubbing, he closed his book, and looked down at her with a smile. 'What do you want, small Perdita?'

Perdita rubbed harder than ever, and said, 'Please, a story.'

'Very well,' said the Rector. 'I will tell you a story out of this book.'

And this is the story that he told her.

THE TALE OF GAWAINE AND THE LOATHLY LADY

'One Christmas-tide King Arthur held his Court at Carlisle, with much gaiety and merriment,

hunting and hawking by day, and feasting and minstrelsy after dark.

'On Christmas night the whole Court was gathered round the tables in the Great Hall, while the minstrels made sweet music, and the cooks brought up more and yet more great silver chargers with joints and pies and marchpanes, and all manner of rich things to eat.

'The revelry was at its height when the door of the hall burst open. Snow whirled in from the darkness, and with it came a maiden, who sped up the hall with flying hair, and cast herself down at the King's feet.

'"What would you with me, fair maid?" asked Arthur, much surprised.

'"Oh, King," she cried, "I would that you should right a great wrong. This morning, as my love and I walked abroad, making plans for our wedding, we came by chance to a certain loch called Tarn Wathelan, on the shore of which there stands a grim castle. And as we stood by the shores of the loch, there came rushing out a knight as tall as two men, armed with a great club, who called on my love to yield himself. Now, my love would have drawn his sword, but the enchantment which binds all that country fell upon him, and all his strength ebbed away. So the surly knight disarmed and bound him, and dragged us both into his castle, where there were many woeful captives chained to the walls; and there he chained my love, and would have chained me, too, but that I begged and prayed

his mercy until at last he let me go." The poor maiden covered her face with her hands, and her yellow hair fell all about her. "And so I come to you, Sire, to beg that you or one of your knights will fight this monster, and restore my love to me."

'Now, at this there was a murmuring all through the Hall, and several of the knights rose to their feet.

'But the King said, "This is my quest." And though the Queen tried to dissuade him, he remained firm.

'So the poor maiden was given a seat at table and a sleeping-place among the Queen's maidens; and early next morning King Arthur set out, riding a great white destrier, and with the winter sunshine flashing back from his armour and the golden dragon on his shield. On he rode through the wild Border country, until at last he came to Tarn Wathelan. He reined in his horse, and sat a moment looking at the dark, ice-fringed loch, and at the grim castle on its farther shore; and then he raised the horn hanging at his saddle-bow and blew a great blast.

'Out from the castle gateway rode a gigantic knight on a great black horse, who came thundering round the margin of the loch, brandishing a battle-axe above his head. King Arthur swung his horse round, and drew his sword Excalibur; but at that moment the enchantment of the place fell on him, too. Down dropped his painted shield, down dropped his sword-arm, and he could only sit his horse, and wait for the savage knight to come up.

'"Yield ye, King Arthur," cried the knight in a great voice, as he reined in his horse. "Yield ye to my power."

'"What else can I do?" asked the King, looking at him between the eyes.

'At this the surly giant nodded, and lowered his battle-axe. "I could chain you among the other good knights in yonder castle," he said; "but you shall have a chance to ransom yourself and your kingdom; for I am a merciful man. Swear to return here on New Year's Day, bringing me the answer to this question: 'What thing is it that all women desire?'—and you shall go free. If you cannot bring me the answer, you shall return here and yield yourself to me, for your life is forfeit."

'What could the King do, being powerless even to lift his sword-arm, but swear to return on New Year's Day, with or without the answer to the knight's question? He swore to return, and, turning his horse, rode sadly away.

'He rode up and down the countryside; and every woman he met, whether she was a peasant's wife or a lady of rank, he asked, "What thing is it that all women desire?"

'And every woman gave him a different answer. Some said wealth, and some said beauty, some said power, and some said love, some said happiness, and some said fine clothes. And the King thanked each of them, and wrote down the answer on a long strip of parchment, but he knew that none of these answers was the right one.

'The days sped on, and at last came the morning of New Year's Day; and still the King had not found what it is that all women desire. So he turned his horse's head towards Tarn Wathelan, and rode grimly back to yield himself up to his enemy. But as he was riding through the forest, chin sunk on breast, and heart filled with black despair, he heard a woman's voice, soft and warm, that called to him, "Good morrow, my liege."

'The King drew rein, and looked about him, and presently he saw a woman seated between an oak and a holly-tree; and her gown was gay and scarlet as the holly-berries, and her skin as brown and wrinkled as the few dead leaves that still clung to the oak-tree. As the King parted the twigs and rode towards her, he saw that she was hideously ugly. She had but one eye, her nose was long and bent to one side of her face, while her chin curved in the opposite direction, and her hair hung in lank elf-locks round her scraggy throat; but when she spoke again, her voice was still sweet, and warm, and beautiful. "You are very discourteous," she said, "to stare so at a lady!"

'The King begged her pardon, and she sighed, and said, "Nay, I know that I am loathly to look at; but none the less, you would be wise to entreat me well; for I can read you the riddle on which your life depends!"

'"Lady," said King Arthur, "if you can tell me what thing it is that all women desire, I pray you do so!"

'But the lady replied, "Not so fast! Before I tell you that, you shall swear to me, on the cross of your sword, that if my answer is the true one, you will come back here and faithfully do that which I shall demand of you."

'The King was unwilling to pledge himself thus blindly, but he saw that he had no choice; so he drew his sword, and, holding it before him, so that the hilt was like a cross, swore to do whatever the loathly lady bade him. When he had sworn (the lady watching him the while, with her one eye), she said, "Now go back to the knight of Tarn Wathelan, and tell him this: 'The thing which all women desire is *Their Own Way*.'"

'So the King rode back to Tarn Wathelan, and blew a blast on his horn. The knight was expecting him, and came rushing out at once; and King Arthur cried out to him, "The thing which all women desire is *Their Own Way*."

'Now, at this the knight fell into a great rage. "Who told you that?" he thundered.

'"A lady whom I met this morning," replied the King.

'"Was she foul of face and crooked of body?"

'"She was as ugly as a woman can be," said Arthur, "and sat between an oak and a holly-tree."

'"Then she was my sister!" bellowed the knight; "and if ever I catch her, I will roast her over a slow fire for this!" and he fell to biting his fingers until the blood dabbled his chin. At last he said, "None the less, the answer is true, and your

ransom paid." And, turning his back on the King, he strode off round the margin of the loch.

'Greatly rejoicing, the King rode back to the Loathly Lady. He found her where he had left her, between the oak and the holly; and she laughed when she saw him, and asked, "Was it the right answer?"

'"Should I be here if it were not?" asked Arthur, reining in beside her. "And now, Lady, what is it that you demand of me in payment for your aid?"

'"This," said she. "That you bring me here one of your gallant young knights to wed me."

'There was an awful silence, and the King was just about to refuse, when she said quickly, "You swore it on the cross of your sword. Is Arthur Pendragon not a man of honour?"

'So the King bowed his head, and said, "Madam, Arthur Pendragon does not break his word."

'On the second day of the year, King Arthur rode into Carlisle. Queen Guenevere was in her bower, working at her tapestry frame; and when he entered the room she flung down her coloured wools and ran to him, demanding to know whether he had killed the surly knight.

'Sadly the King told her all that had passed. "If only I could pay this ghastly price myself!" he groaned.

'"I will pay it for you," said a voice behind him, and swinging round, he saw Gawaine, his nephew, standing in the doorway.

'At sight of the tall young man, with his steady grey eyes and laughing mouth, Arthur could have wept, for he loved Gawaine.

'"The price is too heavy," he said. "She is too hideous a creature to be any man's wife."

'"Yet she shall be mine, if she will have me," said Gawaine. "Dear uncle, do not look so doleful."

'"Do not pledge yourself now," said Arthur. "To-morrow we will make a hunt. We will hunt the forest towards Tarn Wathelan, and you shall see her; then it will be time enough for you to make up your mind."

'"So be it," said Sir Gawaine gravely, and turning he left the Queen's bower.

'Next day the hunting party set out, with fifty couple of hounds in leash. Everyone was very merry, and the merriest of all was Sir Gawaine, who laughed as he rode, and glanced about him quickly at everything he passed. Even Sir Kay, the King's ill-tempered foster-brother, was in a boisterous humour, and had gathered round himself the most careless and unruly of the young knights; and to these Gawaine joined himself. Presently they put up a stag, but lost it again amid the gloomy thickets of holly and yew, oak and hazel that crowded the border country.

'And then, quite suddenly, they came upon the Loathly Lady, sitting between the oak and holly-trees. And truly, she was direly hideous!

'At sight of her, Sir Kay, having no manners,

began to jibe at her, saying, "Come, which of you will woo yon damsel? By the Powers, she has a face that no man could forget."

'And the young men began to follow his example, jeering at the Loathly Lady, who rose up and stood before them, with her ugly head held high.

'There was something about her that reminded Gawaine, who came up at that moment, of a deer beset by yelping hounds; and he forced his way through the crowd towards her. "Shame on you!" he cried, "to jibe at any maiden so! Have you all forgot your vows of chivalry? Go home and mend your manners."

'The young men looked discomfited, and next moment the King was in their midst, saying, "It were well for you to look more kindly on this lady, since one of you must indeed woo her to wife."

'The crowd gasped; and Gawaine laughed, and said, "Well, who is it to be?"

'But the knights began to draw back, whistling to their hounds, and pretending to be very anxious to pick up the scent again.

'Then Sir Gawaine turned to the lady, and taking her hand, he bowed over it, saying, "Lady, I will be a loyal husband to you, if you will do me the honour to become my wife."

'The poor lady drew back, and stood looking at him, very gently despite her hideous aspect. "You are too young and straight," she said, "to wed with such as I. Oh, think again, before it is

too late and we are bound together by ties you cannot break."

'"I have thought," replied Sir Gawaine, "and I ask you again to honour me by becoming my wife."

'"Oh, Sir Knight," said the lady, "you shall never regret this marriage."

'They brought a horse with a side-saddle, and when the lady moved towards it everyone saw that she was lame, as well as ugly, but Sir Gawaine walked beside her, and mounted her from his knee. Then the whole party turned and headed back towards Carlisle. The Loathly Lady rode between the King and her betrothed, and behind them followed all the rest, some horrified, some sniggering.

'But Queen Guenevere understood. She dressed the ugly bride in a gown of gleaming satin as pale and green and dewy-shimmering as a newly unfurled bracken frond, and stood beside her during the wedding ceremony, which took place that evening.

'When the wedding was over there was a long banquet, and the bride and bridegroom sat side by side; but when that, too, was over, and the dancing began, Gawaine's friends thought that now he would be free of his hideous bride for a little while.

'But Gawaine said, "The bride and groom must open the dance together." And he took the Loathly Lady by the hand, and led her out on to the floor. And as she moved clumsily through the complicated steps of the dance, no one dared to

look as though anything were amiss, for Sir Gawaine's eye was upon them.

'When the last measure was danced, and the last wine-cup drained, when the candles had burned out, and the bride had been escorted to the bridal chamber by those of the Queen's ladies who had the kindest hearts, Sir Gawaine said good-night to his friends, and followed her.

'The lady was sitting in a great chair by the fire when he entered the bridal chamber, but he did not look at her. He sat down in another chair opposite, and, leaning forward, gazed sadly into the flames.

'"Have you no word for me, husband?" asked the Lady. "Can you not even bear to look at me?"

'Then Gawaine raised his head and looked at her, and straightway sprang to his feet with a cry of glad astonishment. The lady rose and stood before him, proud and graceful in her gleaming gown. She was no longer the hideous creature he had married, but a young and very beautiful maiden. Her skin was as white as milk, and her mouth as red as a four-season rose, and her long hair was dark and glossy as the water in a mill leet which is overhung with trees.

'"Oh, my Lord," said she, smiling, "do you like me better so?"

'"Who are you?" demanded Gawaine, for he could not believe that the lovely maiden before him was really his bride.

'"I am your wife, whom you married this

evening," said the lady. "Your loving wife, who will never forget that you wedded her when she was loathly to look upon, and treated her with as much courtesy as though she had been the Queen."

'But Gawaine was so bewildered that he could only stammer, "But—but—what has happened?—you are so changed."

'"It was an enchantment," explained the Lady. "I will tell you presently, but first—let us just be happy for a little while," and she held out her hands to him.

'So Gawaine took her in his arms and kissed her. "Dear heart," said he, "I wed you thinking to serve my uncle and a lady in distress, and instead I have gained my heart's desire."

'"I am so glad that you like me," said the lady, in a small, soft voice, and she rested her head against Gawaine's shoulder. But presently she drew back and said, "Oh, my Lord, listen to me." She sat down again, and when he had taken the chair opposite, went on: "I am the sister of the knight of Tarn Wathelan. Our father was a great duke, and loved us dearly, our mother being dead. But one sad day he married again, and his second wife was a witch! She could not bear that our father should love anyone but herself; and so she laid her spells on both of us, changing my brother from the best and gentlest of knights into the monster you have heard of, and me, from what I am now, to what I was when you first saw me. Now that a young and gallant knight has taken me

to wife, the spell is partly lifted, and I may wear my own face and form for half of each day. . . . And now, my Lord, the choice lies with you: will you have me fair by day and hideous by night, or fair by night and foul in the day-time?"

'Then Sir Gawaine thought, "I will have her fair by night, and keep her to myself like a jewel in a golden casket." So he said quickly, "Ah, my Beloved, be fair for me alone!"

'"Alas!" sighed the Lady. "And must I alone be ugly among all the Queen's ladies? Must men look on me with disdain, and women with pity, when I am as fair as the fairest of them?"

'"Forgive me," said Gawaine humbly. "Be your beautiful self by day, and take your rightful place among the ladies round the Queen; and at night I shall hear your warm voice in the darkness, and know that you are my own dear lady."

'Then the lady smiled as though she were very happy, though the tears sparkled in her eyes, but she shook her head, saying, "Yet I would fain keep my beauty for you, my love."

'"Then," said Gawaine, "I leave the choice to you. Your woman's wit makes you better able than I to choose wisely. Choose for yourself, dear heart; and whatever your choice, I shall be content."

'When he said this, the lady sprang to her feet. "Now I am free!" she cried, "for you have given me *My Own Way*, and the spell is quite broken! Now I shall always be as I am at this moment,

until age shall change us both. You have freed my brother, too; and so, because I love him dearly, I am doubly thankful to you, my dear love."

'Then Gawaine took her in his arms again, and kissed her, very tenderly.

'Next morning, when Sir Gawaine led his bride forth from their chamber, the whole Court was astonished. Great was the rejoicing over Sir Gawaine's marriage; and the wedding festivities were resumed, and made a fitting end to the Christmas junketings.

'And that is the end of the tale of Sir Gawaine and the Loathly Lady.'

V

THE HOLLY AND THE IVY

THE day before Christmas Eve it began to snow. In the morning the sky was like grey fur; and presently the flakes began to fall—white flakes that looked for all the world like the little downy white feathers from under a wood-pigeon's wing. And Tryphena paused in her task of making frumenty and looked up at the sky, and said, 'The old woman is plucking her geese.'

Perdita was helping her with the frumenty, which was made of new wheat and a sort of egg-custard, with sugar candy on top. She was breaking up the big, golden-brown lumps of sugar into little bits; and sometimes, when she thought Tryphena was not looking, she put a little bit in her mouth. But when Tryphena spoke about the old woman plucking her geese, Perdita dropped the golden crumb that was half-way to her mouth, and ran to the window.

'Oh dear! I hope it doesn't get too deep,' she said.

Usually, Perdita loved snow as much as anybody, but with Robin due to arrive home from school next day, snowdrifts across the deep-rutted roads would be a tragedy. Robin and Adam always rode home together as far as the crossroads two miles above Broomhill village, and they never got home

until Christmas Eve, because school was two days' journey away; and if the snow got too deep, neither of them would get home until Christmas was all over. Christmas without Robin was unthinkable. So Perdita pressed her nose anxiously against the window-pane, and watched the snow coming down—just a flake here and a flake there, powdering the ground with white, and settling on the twigs of the bare trees.

'T'won't come to much,' said Tryphena, comfortingly. 'You'll see.'

And she was right, for towards evening the white flakes came down more and more slowly, until at last they stopped altogether. And when Perdita awoke on the morning of Christmas Eve, the sky was full of stars that sparkled bravely until the darkness paled to milky blue, and the sun rose and the fallen snow was clear, singing yellow in the sunshine and as blue as wild hyacinths in the shade.

But long before the sun was up Billie was off and away, leading Tansie and riding the Rector's second horse, to meet Robin at the posting inn at South Molton. The boys always rode the last stage on their own horses; it was simpler that way, because otherwise there was all the business of getting the post-horses down to the nearest staging inn, which was at Bideford.

All day long Perdita's mother was very busy; so was Tryphena, and so was Perdita. There was such a running up and down stairs, such an airing of linen and baking of pies and marchpanes, such a

washing of the best pewter and setting out of the little withered yellow apples that had been stored in bran since the harvest—all in honour of Christmas and Robin's home-coming!

There was a great Twelfth-cake in the larder, and the bowl of frumenty, and a pink ham smelling of the herbs it had been smoked with, and geese and poultry enough to feed an army (but people ate more in those days than they do now). And Perdita saw them, and all the other lovely things, every time her mother or Tryphena sent her into the larder to fetch something; and every time something inside her bounced slightly. Not that she was a greedy person, but the Christmas fare did look so very exciting!

All day long she ran about, fetching and carrying, and wherever she went she was sure to find Bran or Peterkin, or both of them, under her feet—except when they were under someone else's—until at last her mother became so exasperated with the two of them that she pushed them out into the snowy garden and shut the door on them with a bang.

Late in the afternoon Perdita's mother gave her a little bowl of frumenty, a piece of gilt gingerbread, and a roast capon wrapped in a napkin, and told her to take them to Johnnie-the-Sexton, who lived alone at the other end of the village. Perdita put on her dark blue frieze cloak, and pulled the crimson-lined hood well forward to keep the cold out of her ears, and set out. She was joined at once by Bran and Peterkin, and the three of them went on

together. Peterkin was used to snow, and did not really like it very much, because his legs were so short; but to Bran it was the first snow of his life, and most exciting. He ran along with his legs spread very wide apart, and his nose on the ground, giving little shrill barks because it was so strange and new and cold.

Perdita took the road straight through the village, until she came to the low-browed cottage where Johnnie lived with his grey cat Deborah. The cottage was hooded deep in snow—deeper than any other cottage in the village, because it was just where the north wind came down round the shoulder of the Broomhill, and so the snow had drifted there; and as Perdita knocked at the door, a round blob of snow slipped off the branch of a witchen tree on to Bran's head, making him sneeze and flap his ears. He looked so funny that Perdita nearly fell into the drift herself with laughing; but at that moment Johnnie opened the door and bade her come inside.

Johnnie-the-Sexton was a very little old man, with a very big nose that was as red as his face was white, and sparkling black eyes, and wonderful hands for carving things out of scraps of wood. Perdita followed him into the smoky kitchen, and handed over the things she had brought, and wished him a merry Christmas.

The old man put them down on the clean-scrubbed table, and picked up something small that was lying there. 'Thank Mistress Pettle for me,

will 'ee, my dear?' said he. 'Thank her kindly.' And he pressed the something small into Perdita's hand. 'And y'ere be a li'l Christmas gift for 'ee, my pretty.'

It was a tiny baby owl, fluffed out and blinky, carved out of cherry-wood.

'Oh!' cried Perdita, looking from the owl to the sexton and back again. 'He's lovely! Oh thank you, *dear* Johnnie!'

She ran home by way of the river meadow behind the village, with Bran and Peterkin scampering at her heels. The river was running quiet and dark between ice-narrowed banks, and the willows and alders were dark against the snow, and every bramble-leaf was edged with white frost-ermine. There were tracks in the snow—little wildling tracks that told where Rabbit and Fox and Tiggy the hedgehog had passed in the night, and bird-tracks that came and went among them. But not a single Pharisee did Perdita find, for they were all curled up among the dry, warm roots of the trees, deep in their winter sleep, along with the moles and field-mice.

When Perdita reached home she found that her father had returned from his long ride over the hills to visit various sick people, and was hanging up garlands of holly and ivy in the hall. (In the West Country, folks believe that if holly is brought into the house before Christmas Eve, ill luck will follow.) The Rector was standing on the great carved chest, with his head lost in the shadows, while Perdita's

mother stood below him, and handed him up all the things he needed when he was ready for them. Perdita joined her family, and the Rector gave her his knife to hold until he wanted it. And now, as the time went on, she began to listen for the sound of horses' hooves in the lane. Of course she knew that Robin could not possibly be within half a dozen miles yet, but still, the impossible *did* sometimes happen.

But the last garland was hung up, and the winter twilight had drawn in to deep blue dusk beyond the candle-flames reflected in the parlour windows, and Perdita had been sitting on her little stool before the fire for quite a long while, before at last they heard the dull sound of horses' hooves coming up the snowy lane.

Perdita's mother put down her tapestry frame and the Rector laid aside his book, and Perdita dropped Jessica on to the rushes as she jumped up, and Bran and Peterkin began to bark. They heard Tryphena coming from the kitchen, with the stable lantern which she had in readiness; then they were all crowding out into the wintry night, with the stars shimmering frost-bright overhead, and the light from the stable lantern casting a pool of gold on to the snow.

Next moment a solid knot of horsemen had rounded the corner of the church and reined in before the Rectory; three of them instead of the two they had expected. Robin slid from his saddle and after shaking hands with his father, took his

mother in a bear-like hug, talking very fast all the while.

'Can Adam come in for a while? His people have gone into Bideford, to see the Christmas Players at the Mermaid, and won't be back till midnight, so his groom told us. So we sent the man home alone, and I brought Adam along with me. Is it all right?'

Perdita's mother did not really want anyone outside the family that evening, but she was angry with Sir John and his lady, and she thought of Adam riding back to that great empty Manor house, and having his supper all alone, on Christmas Eve of all nights. So she said quickly, in her lovely, warm voice, 'Come away in, Adam; we shall love to have you.'

Adam said, 'It is very good of you, Mistress Pettle,' and dismounted rather stiffly.

Billie had already dismounted, and, followed by Tryphena with the great horn lantern, was disappearing stablewards with all three horses.

'Come along, my dears. It is freezing hard,' said Perdita's mother, and she shepherded them all within doors.

The yellow glow of the wax candles seemed very bright after the darkness outside, and the fire of beech logs on the hearth sent warm saffron lights and strange blue shadows flickering up the walls.

'Lovely!' said Robin. 'Glory, but I'm tired!' His voice started in a growl, very deep, and ran up suddenly into a squeak, very high.

His mother began to laugh.

'Oh, Robin, your voice is breaking!' she exclaimed.

Then they were all laughing, even Robin, who had turned as red as a peony; and the dogs were barking their heads off.

Very soon they were all settled before the fire, Perdita's father and mother in their usual chairs, and Perdita on her little stool. Robin squatted down on his heels beside her, and began to play with Bran, and Adam sat down on another joint-stool close by. Everybody was very flushed and gay, and everybody talked very fast, exchanging news and making plans—all except Adam, who sat quiet, staring into the fire. Perdita found that she was still not at all shy of Adam, even though she had not seen him for months. (You can't feel shy of a person who has made elder-pipes for you, and walked *miles* with your rather hot hand in his, at St. Margaret's Fair.) She thought it was very unkind of Sir John and Lady Annersly to go off like that, when Adam was coming home, and she thought he looked lonely; so she edged her stool close up to him, and told him she still had the elder-pipes safely.

He looked down at her in his funny, half-laughing way, and brought out from the breast of his doublet something that sparkled in the firelight. 'Hold out your hands, li'l maid,' he ordered. 'Here's a Christmas fairing for you.'

Perdita did as she was bid, and he dropped the

something bright into them. It was a tiny Tudor Rose of red enamel hanging on a chain as fine as a silver thread. It was the first jewel that Perdita had ever possessed, and for a moment she could not say anything at all.

'Do you like it?' asked Adam anxiously. 'I thought it was pretty.'

'It *is*,' said Perdita. 'Oh, it's the *beautifullest* thing!' And she bounced up and ran to her mother. 'Mammy, mammy! Look what Adam has given me for Christmas!'

Her mother looked. 'Poppet, how lovely!' she said. 'Turn round, and I'll put it on you.'

So Perdita turned round, and her mother clasped the little silver clasp, and it was on. Then Perdita remembered that she had not said thank you properly to Adam. So she went and stood in front of him, gravely, with her hands behind her back, and said, 'Thank you very much for my Christmas present, Adam.'

Next moment the door opened and Tryphena stuck her head round it and announced that supper was ready. So they all got up, and the Rector and Mistress Pettle led the way into the dining parlour, and Perdita and the boys followed them, Adam limping more than usual, because he was stiff and tired after two days in the saddle.

Perdita had helped her mother to set the table earlier in the day, and it looked as pretty and festive as any table could possibly look, even on Christmas Eve. The candle-flames were like tiny

yellow crocuses on top of the wax candles, and the light from them fell golden on the polished pewter and the tall silver salt-cellar, the gilt gingerbread and pink and white marchpanes and sugary dried fruits, and all the gay, pretty things with which the table was spread. There were more candles on the side-chest, among the solid eatables, and the shiny dark leaves of the holly and ivy decking the walls sparkled in the light. Usually there were two candles, and no more, on the table, and the extra brightness of the room made Perdita feel all pink and excited inside. She looked across at her mother, and they smiled at each other, as though to say, 'Yes, we have made it look nice, haven't we?'

Everyone stood gravely and with bowed heads round the table, while the Rector said Grace. Perdita had found by long practice that it was possible to open her eyes enough to see quite a lot, without being caught out; so now she opened them just a little, and looked up through her lashes. Everybody looked very solemn, standing there with bowed heads. Even Adam looked solemn. She loved seeing them all like that, when they did not know anyone was watching them.

When Grace was over they all pulled out their chairs and sat down; and Perdita's father began to carve the pink boiled ham. Supper took a long time, for the 'silence at table' rule was relaxed, in honour of its being Christmas Eve and Robin's first meal at home; so everyone talked a great deal.

They were still talking and eating when the door burst open, and Tryphena appeared once more, smiling all over her face. She said, 'If 'ee please, sir, the Mummers have arrived!'

There was a breathless silence, like the hush that comes, nowadays, in the lovely moment when the candles are first lit on the Christmas-tree.

Then Perdita's father said gravely, 'Will you tell the Mummers that we will give ourselves the pleasure of waiting upon them in a few minutes, Tryphena?'

Perdita began to bounce up and down a little in her chair, because she was too excited to sit still. Robin swallowed a piece of gingerbread whole, while Adam laughed at him, and Perdita's mother, catching Perdita's imploring eye, rose and shook out the skirts of her farthingale. There was a great pushing back of chairs, and Bran and Peterkin, who had been waiting for scraps under the table, came bundling out and began to bark.

They went down the stone-flagged passage in solemn procession, Perdita's father first, with her mother's hand on his arm, then Robin and Perdita, hand in hand, then Adam, and lastly the dogs, bouncing about and squeaking with excitement.

The kitchen might have been the kitchen in a fairy tale. Garlands of holly and ivy sparkled in the light of the great fire that was roaring half up the chimney; the copper pots and pans winked and blinked amid the greenery, and the yellow globes of the dried pumpkins hanging from the rafters

looked like huge golden lanterns. The brick floor had been newly scrubbed and was as red as a rose, and on the table Tryphena had set out a beautiful Twelfth-cake, and a leatherjack of cider and a wooden bowl piled high with withered russet apples.

In the middle of all this, looking as though they felt rather foolish, stood several extraordinary people, dressed in odds and ends of coloured cloth and paste-board, with a great deal of paint and gilding about them, and a lot of false hair made of hemp. One of them wore a paste-board helmet and carried an old dirk for a sword; he looked really very like Martin-Blacksmith, but Perdita knew that he was St. George, and would have scorned to greet him by name, although he was a great friend of hers in private life. It was the same with the doctor, in a black, high-crowned hat, and with an immense pill in his hand—played by Billie-the-Garden—and the Saracen, with a black face and a huge wooden broadsword, and the dragon and the Black Prince, and the King of Egypt's daughter, and all the others. Everybody knew who they were, and everybody (even Perdita's father) pretended they did not.

The grown-ups settled themselves on joint-stools, Adam sat on the salt butter-cask, with Bran between his knees, and Perdita and Robin perched on the edge of the table, stifling Peterkin, who was inclined to be noisy, between them.

Then the play began. It was a thrilling play, and as Perdita followed the adventures of St. George

and the Dragon and the Princess of Egypt and all the rest of them, she leaned so far forward in her excitement that she very nearly lost her balance and toppled on to her nose; but Robin grabbed her just in time. When St. George and the Saracen fought each other, she could hardly breathe for anxiety, and when St. George was mortally wounded and fell down very flat, she almost wept, and did not even notice that Robin was picking currants out of the Twelfth-cake and eating them. But the doctor knelt beside St. George and gave him the huge pill. It was made of bread, and looked rather dirty, and St. George did not seem to like it very much, but it healed his wounds immediately, and he jumped up and made a long speech, at the end of which everyone clapped him so much that his ears turned bright red. And quite soon after that was the end of the play.

While the Mummers were being fed on the apples and cider and the rather pock-marked cake, and all the grown-ups were talking, Perdita and the boys crouched down before the blazing fire and began to roast chestnuts among the hot embers. Their faces grew crimson in the firelight, and they burnt their fingers in fishing out the chestnuts. They did not talk much, but they were all three very happy.

Presently the Mummers departed, all but Billie; and Adam said regretfully that he must go. So they trooped down the stone-flagged passage again; and Adam swung his short riding-cloak round his

shoulders, and picked up his bonnet from the carved chest. Then they heard Billie bring round the horse.

On the doorstep Adam turned and bowed to Perdita's mother. 'Thank you for this evening, M-Mistress Pettle. It has been a very happy one for me.' He shook hands with the Rector, clapped Robin on the shoulder, and swept Perdita the lowest and most swaggering bow imaginable.

She knew he was laughing down at her, although it was too dark to see his face, but she did not mind in the least now, because she knew that he did not laugh unkindly.

Then he swung into the saddle, and with a gay 'Good night, a merry Christmas to you!' wheeled his horse and went drumming off into the starry darkness.

It was a very still night, and they heard his horse's hoof-beats for a long time, while they stood grouped in the doorway.

Perdita was gazing up at the frost-bright stars overhead. 'Christmas Eve,' she said. 'Lovely!' And she nuzzled against her father until he put his arm round her. 'I think Sir John and Lady Annersly are pigs!' she added; 'but it was nice, having Adam this evening.'

'Perdita, you must *not* call people pigs,' said her mother.

And Robin said, 'Poor old Adam', and began to whistle under his breath.

'Bed-time, Poppet,' said Perdita's mother, as

they drew back into the hall, and the Rector closed the door.

Perdita sighed. She did not want to go to bed, but she had already been allowed to sit up long past her bed-time, and she knew that when her mother said a thing she meant it.

So she gathered Jessica from the parlour, and lit her chamber candlestick from the hall pricket, curtseyed gravely to her family, and trotted upstairs. It was bitterly cold in her bedroom, so as soon as she had put the little enamelled rose into the painted wooden box which Robin had given her for her birthday, she tore off her clothes in a great hurry and dived into bed, pulling the bed-clothes up to her nose. Then she said her prayers, which of course she should have done *before* getting into bed—only it was such a very cold night.

Presently her mother came up, swishing into her room in her wide farthingale, and dropped a kiss on the tip of Perdita's nose. 'Good night, sweetheart. Happy dreams,' she said. Then she blew out the candle, and went away, leaving the door ajar so that a narrow strip of faint yellow light spilled through into the darkness.

But Perdita did not go to sleep. Instead she lay staring at the strip of light, waiting for Robin. Robin always came to say good night to her when he was home for the holidays. She only had to wait a little while, and then she heard him coming upstairs. He pushed the door open, and came in and sat down with a bump on her feet.

'Ow!' said Perdita, kicking. 'You're sitting on my feet!'

'Shouldn't have such big ones,' Robin told her; but he shifted farther up the bed. 'Nice day, Poppet?'

'Mm!' said Perdita, in a fat, contented voice. 'Lovely!'

Robin gave her knees a little pat. 'Shall I tell you a secret, Baby—a really exciting secret?'

'Please,' breathed Perdita, burrowing towards him under the bed-clothes.

'Well, then, there's a whisper—only a whisper, mind—that the Queen's Grace may come this way on her travels next summer.'

'Oh!' Perdita shot up in bed and clutched him round the neck. 'Robin, *dear* Robin, is it true? How do you know?'

'I said it was only a whisper yet, and I heard it from Harry Maitland—you know, I've told you about Harry Maitland, whose father is at Court.'

Perdita tightened her hold on his neck until he wriggled. 'Robin—*do* you think we might actually *see* her?'

'I shouldn't wonder,' said Robin. 'You never know what may happen if you only wish hard enough. And now you must go to sleep. Lie down, Poppet.'

Perdita lay down obediently, and Robin tucked the bedclothes round her ears.

'Good night, Perdita,' he said. Then he was gone.

So the Pharisees had not forgotten their promise—the Pharisees and the Grey Maiden. She was sure that she would not be able to go to sleep—how could she, when her inside was all light and bubbly with excitement? But it had been a long and exciting day, and very soon she was sound asleep, after all. At midnight she woke up just enough to hear the Christmas bells ringing out from the church tower over the snow-covered roofs of the village. But she had been dreaming about the Queen Elizabeth story, and drifted back to sleep again with the vague idea that Halsyon, Hautclere, Douce, John, and Gabriel were ringing for Gloriana.

VI

SAMARKAND THE GOLDEN

AFTER church on Christmas Day, Mistress Pettle received a message from a friend of hers, a Mistress Heard, who was married to a merchant in Bideford Town.

'Tim,' said Mistress Pettle to the Rector, 'Rose Heard wants us all to go to her for Twelfth Night, and see the junketings, and stay until next day. Do you think we might go? I have my last year's flowered tabby, and Perdita has her grey gown with the crimson sleeves.'

The Rector thought for a moment, and then he smiled his slow, lop-sided smile, and said, 'I think we might.'

So Mistress Pettle told Perdita and Robin that they were all going into Bideford for the Twelfth-Night merry-makings.

Perdita went away into the apple loft, where there would be no one to bother her, and sat on her heels and thought about it. She thought about Mistress Heard, who was round and soft and pleasant, like a full-blown cabbage rose, and Master Heard, who was square and hard and weather-beaten, like the figure-head of one of his own ships, only not so gaily coloured. She thought about the tall, narrow house in the street with the river sparkling at its

lower end, and she thought about all the things she had ever heard of Twelfth-Night celebrations: the dancing and revelry, the bands of 'prentices dressed up and milling through the streets, with the Lord of Misrule carried shoulder-high in their midst, and the swinging lanterns and pasteboard dragons and broken heads.

Oh, it would be lovely!

But on the day after the invitation came more snow, much more snow, and then a quick thaw, and then rain. Day after day it went on raining. Sometimes a rift would appear in the clouds and a stray sunbeam would find its way through to stroke the sodden hedgerows with its finger-tip, and the last remaining berries would shine scarlet, and the blackbird would sing a few hopeful notes from the top of the Rectory mulberry-tree. But always the clouds closed up again, as thickly as ever, and the slanting grey javelins of the rain would come driving in from the west. The whole world seemed to be melting away while you watched it, and the roads turned to impassable quagmires.

But still, as Twelfth Day drew near, Perdita went on hoping, desperately, though she knew that it was really no use. On the eleventh day of Christmas the rain stopped, and the wind rose instead; but by then, of course, it was too late, and Billie-the-Garden, who had been sent on an errand to the next village, came back with the news that the floods were out all across the valley road between Broomhill and Bideford, and judging by the snow-

water still coming down from Dartmoor, seemed likely to remain out for a week at least.

There would be no long ride into the town, no wearing of Perdita's grey gown with the crimson sleeves, no revelry or noise or streets full of holiday crowds and bobbing lanterns. Perdita wept on her mother's neck.

On Twelfth Day morning Robin begged a large pasty from Tryphena, and, with the dogs at his heels, went off rabbiting with a party of farm-lads. But Perdita could not go rabbiting, and so she was left behind. She did not cry any more about not going to Bideford (she always took her sorrows quietly), but she was a very subdued little girl that morning at her lessons, and she found it dreadfully difficult to eat her dinner, because the boiled mutton turned to sawdust and stuck in her throat.

But dinner was scarcely over, and the Rector gone to his study to begin his next Sunday's sermon, when Adam Hilyarde appeared in mud-caked riding-boots and his oldest clothes, carrying Bathsheba on his gloved fist.

'Why, Adam!' exclaimed Perdita's mother, when Tryphena thrust him into the dining parlour. 'Have you had your dinner?'

'Yes, thank you, Mistress Pettle. George Prettyjohn and his good wife gave me a meal, up at Whinworthy.'

He glanced about the room, and Perdita's mother said, 'I am afraid Robin is not here. As we could not go into Bideford, after all, he has gone rabbiting with some of the farm-boys.'

Adam made a little shrugging with his shoulders. Knowing that the Rectory folk would not be able to go into Bideford, he had ridden over to spend the afternoon with Robin. He had thought they might take 'Sheba up on to the commons and fly her at rabbits; they would probably not have got any, for the wind was too high really for hawking, but it would have been a pleasant way to spend the afternoon. Still, if Robin had gone off on his own account, that was that.

'I see,' he said. 'I am sorry to have troubled you, Mistress Pettle. I'll be on my way, then.' But at that moment he noticed Perdita, standing in the dark corner by the side-chest, forlorn and doleful as a fledgling bird that had fallen from the nest. 'Perdita,' he said, 'will you come and have a party with me?'

Perdita had been watching him, hoping that he would notice her; she smiled a rather watery smile, and came out of her corner. But she did not say anything.

'I think it would be nice to have a party, don't you?' Adam said.

Perdita gazed beseechingly at her mother, twisting her hands in her kirtle. 'Mammy, may I?'

Mistress Pettle looked at Adam, and said, 'It is very kind of you.' Then she looked at Perdita and said, 'Very well, Poppet.' Then she looked back at Adam and said, 'But she must be home by dark.'

'She shall be,' replied Adam. 'We promise.'

Then he looked down at Perdita, who had come right out of her corner and was standing hopefully in front of him, but keeping well clear of Bathsheba. 'You have not been introduced to Bathsheba, have you?' he said. 'She's not nearly so fierce as she looks. See, stroke her down the back with your forefinger, like this. Let her see your hand first.'

For a moment Perdita was afraid, but she never thought of disobeying Adam. She took a deep breath, and did exactly as he told her. 'Sheba's feathers were soft and warm and alive under her finger, and the hawk made a little pleased bobbing of the head and hunching of the wings.

'She's nice,' said Perdita, surprised.

'Good girl!' said Adam. 'Now I'm going. Come down to Whinworthy in half an hour; not before, because I have some preparations to make; this is going to be a very grand party.'

So it was arranged.

Adam went straight back to Whinworthy, and opened the gatehouse door and stuck his head round it into the smoke-blackened kitchen where Sibly, George's wife, was baking pastries for her goodman, who had a sweet tooth. 'Sibly, dear, I want a fire in the winter-parlour,' said Adam, 'and honey-wax candles, and some of those pastries with your black-cherry preserve; I am entertaining a lady for the afternoon.'

Sibly straightened up from the pies she had just taken out of the oven. Her face was flushed scarlet

with the heat, and her hands all over flour, which she rubbed off on her apron. 'Is it the li'l maid from the Rectory?'

Adam nodded. ''Tis so. Oh, and some of the sugary apricots, Sibly, my dear.'

'You'd wheedle the heart out of a stone, young maister,' said Sibly; but she said it fondly, and went at once to get the black-cherry preserve, because she always did what Adam wanted.

Meanwhile, a much happier Perdita trotted up to her room, and combed her hair and put on the little enamel rose, by way of dressing for the party. Then she trotted downstairs again, and crept into the study, where the Rector was deep in writing his sermon, and sat very still in a corner, watching the brass-faced clock until it should be time to start.

Punctually when the half-hour was up she slipped out of the study, and put on her blue cloak, and pulled the crimson-lined hood forward to keep her ears warm, and set out. At the corner by the church she looked back to wave to her mother, who was standing in the doorway to see her off; and her mother waved back, and called, 'Have a happy time, sweetheart; be good.'

Perdita scurried down the long village street, with a little skip every few yards, because she was happy and excited, picking her way between the puddles and through the mud. No one was about, for the men were at work in the fields, and the women and children within doors. It was a very grey afternoon. Grey woolly clouds scurried low overhead,

and a little, grey, hurly-burly wind swooped down the street and round the cottages. But Perdita did not mind, because she was going to a party. She snuggled her crimson-lined hood closer round her chin, and hurried on.

There was a flicker of firelight through the gate-house window, warm and welcoming in the raw January afternoon, and the weathered timber gates stood open wide; and Perdita scurried through like a blown leaf with the wind behind her, and found herself inside the Manor garden for the first time in her life. It was a cross between a garden and a courtyard, really, with a grass plot and little knot-beds for a garden, and rain-wet cobbles round the sides for a court-yard. The stables and out-buildings huddled close round the sides of it, and the gentle, welcoming face of the house spread across the farther end. It was a dear, friendly place.

Perdita looked round at the low, shingled roofs, speckled with round patches of golden lichen, and the dark holes of the pigeon-cote in the stable wall, and the deep, stone mullioned house windows, and the grass-grown cobbles, and the bare branches of the lime-trees tossing in the wind; and she thought again how nice it would be when the old house woke up and was lived in again, and had candle-light in the house windows after dark, and Crown-Imperial and tiger-lilies and sops-in-wine in the garden. Not that there would be Crown-Imperial and tiger-lilies and sops-in-wine in January, of course; but there

were snowdrops, half unfurled and dancing in the wind, among the long grass of the garden plot. Perdita saw them as she scurried past to the open doorway of the house; and she half thought she caught sight of a Pharisee hovering among them, but she could not be sure. One so seldom can be sure, with Pharisees.

Then the wind came swooshing behind her, and spread out her blue cloak like wings, and swept her right through the open doorway into the dark hall beyond. Shrivelled brown leaves whirled in after her, and for a moment the hall was full of the rush and turmoil of the wind, which rattled the heavy shutters and sent the dry leaves rustling along the floor. Then a door opened far away at the end of the hall, and Adam came out, and walked quickly down to Perdita, where she stood on the windy threshold.

'So the wind has brought you safely,' he said. 'I told him to. I said, "Perdita has promised to have a party with me; go and fetch her, in case she has forgotten."' Now I'm going to shut him out, which seems ungrateful.'

So he shut the door, while Perdita slipped off her cloak and laid it over a carved chest. There were shutters over the windows, so when the door was shut it was very dark; but from that other door at the far end of the hall a broad path of yellow candle-light streamed out across the floor, almost to Perdita's feet.

'Look,' said Adam softly, taking her hand; 'the

Golden Road to Samarkand. Walk carefully, Perdita; you must not stray from the path, and it's only just broad enough for both of us.'

Perdita drew a little, quivering breath of excitement, and went with Adam up the Golden Road, taking care not to step outside it into the darkness.

They came to the doorway at the farther end, and Adam pushed the door wider open, and they went in.

'Welcome to Samarkand the Golden,' said Adam, in a magical sort of voice.

Perdita looked around her breathlessly, and it was lovely! Heavy curtains of faded golden velvet were drawn across the windows to shut out the grey January daylight, and wax candles glimmered like stars on the smoke-hood above the hearth, and a blazing fire of apple-logs sent out long, licking shafts of saffron light, interwoven with fluttering, fantastic shadows. (Parties should never be held in daylight; Adam knew that.) Bathsheba was sitting on a low perch in the farther corner, her eyes shining out from among the shadows when a stray flicker of firelight caught them. There was a little table drawn up before the fire, with exciting-looking mounds on it under a white napkin; there were carved chests against the walls, and beside the table a high-backed chair with a faded cushion on it—really more the sort of chair you would expect to find in a cathedral than in a house. The stone smoke-hood was carved all over with fruit and flowers and birds, except in the middle, where there

was a painted shield with three golden hunting-horns on a smoke-darkened crimson ground. But the most enchanting thing in the room was the great tapestry which hung on the farther wall—a tapestry of people and animals and trees, all mingling together, half seen in the candle-light.

'It's lovely!' said Perdita. 'Oh, Adam, it's lovely!'

Adam led her across the stone floor, right into the heart of the fire-glow and candle-shine. Then he stood and looked down at her; and Perdita stood and looked up at him, twisting her hands in her kirtle.

'First we must make a ball-gown magic!' he said. 'You cannot dance in Samarkand in a sheep's-russet dress!'

'There's my best grey,' suggested Perdita. 'It has crimson sleeves,' she added, hopefully.

Adam shook his head. '*No* Princess could ever dance in Samarkand the Golden in a grey gown. We must change the grey to silver; shimmering silver, like moonshine on running water.'

'With a train?' said Perdita.

'Of course—a long train spreading out behind you like a peacock's tail. Then you must have pearl embroidery on your crimson sleeves, and strings of pearls for your hair, and crimson slippers to match your sleeves—high-heeled slippers. How will that do, my Lady Perdita?'

Perdita heaved a small, blissful sigh by way of answer, and looked down at the great farthingale

which swept out from her waist to the floor like a huge open bell-flower, stiff and shimmering silver in the candle-light. She thrust out one foot, to admire its high-heeled crimson slipper.

'Diamond buckles to your slippers,' said Adam's voice above her.

And at once the diamonds were there, sparkling frost-bright in the fire-glow.

She looked up at Adam. 'Now you,' she said.

He laughed. 'Oh, I shall hang a pearl as big as a wren's egg in my left ear, and everyone will be so busy looking at it that they will not notice the rest of me.'

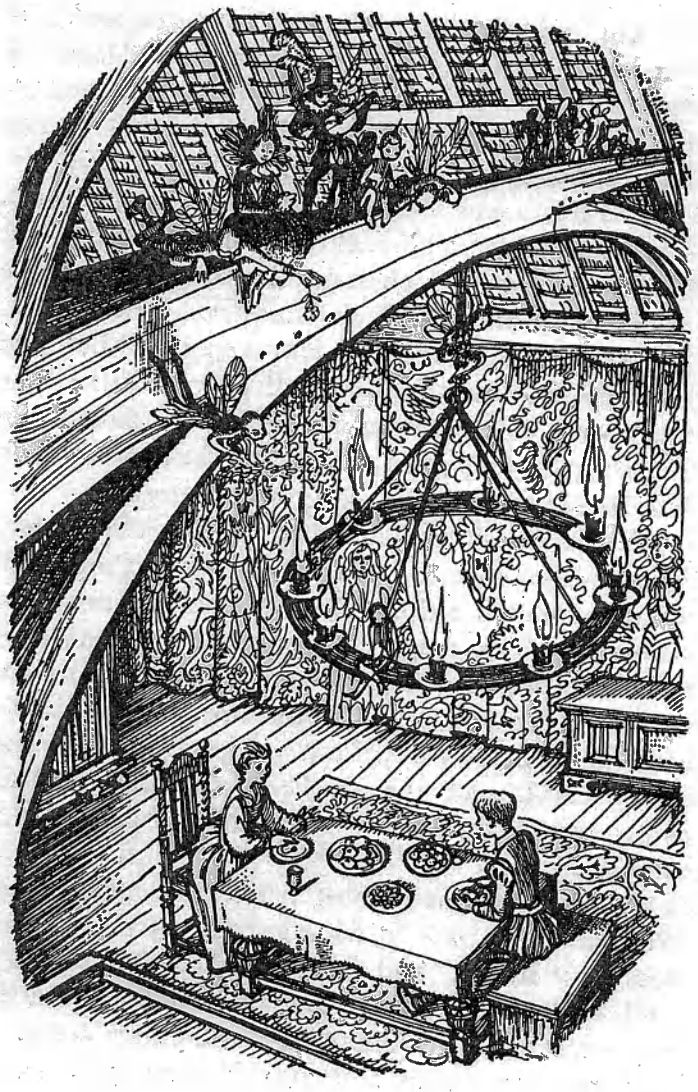
'Who are *They*, please?'

'Why, our guests, of course.' Adam raised his brows. 'The grand folk who are coming to make merry with us presently, after we have had our banquet.'

Perdita said, 'Please, won't They mind if we have our banquet before They come?'

'Oh no. They will have had Their banquet before They come,' Adam told her. 'They will be supping off roast peacocks and pomegranates in honey and unicorn pie at this moment.' And he carefully picked up the napkin that had covered the table.

There were three dishes on the table—a wooden dish of little russet apples, a cloam dish of pastries packed full of black cherry preserve and oozing with yellow-blanketed cream, and a little silver dish full of dried sugared apricots such as every farm-wife kept in jars for party occasions.



'Oh,' said Perdita. She had not eaten much for dinner, because of being so miserable, and now she was hungry.

'Be seated, Madam Perdita,' said Adam, 'and be careful not to crush your train.'

So Perdita was seated, being careful not to crush her train, in the high-backed chair; and Adam sat down on a carved chest at the other side of the table; and they had their banquet.

The pastries were sweet and oozy, and the dried apricots too beautiful for words; and all the time they were eating Adam treated her as though she were a great lady; and all the time the magic, which she had felt from the first, grew and grew.

Perdita was warm and happy, and the golden, candle-lit room was warm and happy, too, and both of them waited a-tiptoe for whatever Adam would do next. The magic wakened several Pharisees who had been sleeping their winter sleep curled up in the dark angles of the roof-beams, and they came walking delicately down the walls, and clung to the deep carving of the smoke-hood, fanning their wings gently to and fro, as a butterfly does in the sunshine.

When there was nothing left to eat, Adam gave Perdita the napkin to wipe her fingers on, for she was very sticky; and Perdita licked and rubbed, and rubbed and licked until she had got rid of every trace of sugar and cream and cherry juice.

Then Adam got up and said, 'Now come with me, Mistress Perdita, and I will show you our guests.'

'*Please!*' said Perdita, hopping up, too.

Adam took down one of the candles from the smoke-hood. And then suddenly he became very grand—as grand as any haughty Spanish Don. He bowed to Perdita, offering her his arm; and Perdita spread her skirts wide, and swept him a slow, deep curtsey—the sort of curtsey that she had seen her mother make when Lady Annersly came to call. Down and down she sank, with her silver skirts billowing around her; and then up and up again to her full height. Then she rested two fingers of her right hand on Adam's wrist, and lifted her skirts an inch or two, and swept across the room beside him, with her silver train sweeping out behind her like a peacock's tail, and her head held very high, because of the pearls twined in her hair, and the high heels of her crimson slippers clicking on the stone floor.

Adam raised the candle high, so that it shed a golden light on the tapestry; and they looked at it together. It was a lovely tapestry. There were lords and ladies in strange, old-fashioned clothes, some of them with hawks on their wrists, others with hounds in leash; there was a white hart with a crucifix between its antlers, and strange flowering-trees with fat pigeons in their branches. And under the feet of the people there were tiny, gay knots of flowers sprinkling the dark green turf, and making a kind of fairy summer that would go on all the year round—primroses and windflowers and wild hyacinths, scarlet pimpernels and heartsease pansies,

little blue forget-me-nots and maiden-pinks and Mary-buds.

'Well,' said Adam, 'these are our guests; do you think you will like them?'

'The Lords and Ladies in the tapestry?' asked Perdita.

'The Lords and Ladies,' said Adam. 'We will ask them out of the tapestry in a little while, if you would like them.'

'Yes—oh yes, please!'

Adam was moving the candle about, and as Perdita followed the golden light, she found that every inch of the tapestry had something interesting in it: now a distant view of a castle with a rose-red, pepper-pot roof, now a running hare, now a strawberry plant with flowers and fruit on it together.

'It's the beautifullest thing I ever saw,' she said.

'Isn't it?' said Adam; and then, 'There is a tapestry just like this in the old Sola at Black Brendon. When my mother was a little maid she loved it; and she went on loving it so much that when she married my father, and came to live here, *her* father had the old tapestry copied, so that she could have the copy with her in her new home. So, you see, the Lords and Ladies were friends of mine, long before I grew old enough to ride over here.'

Then he began to tell her who they were: the grand folk who were coming from their tapestry forest to dance in Samarkand the Golden.

The first lady in the tapestry wore a gown as

yellow as the candle-shine, and her little, proud head was set on her long neck, like a flower on its stem; and there was a hooded merlin on her gloved left wrist, as proud as the lady herself.

'This is the Lady Anne Boleyn,' said Adam. 'Look, she's laughing; people say she was always laughing, whether she was glad or sorry, or afraid. But now she is laughing because she is gay and happy.'

He moved a little, and the candle-light fluttered farther along the tapestry.

'Now, *this* very gorgeous dark gentleman is Seignor Leonardo Franchesco Del Buonorotti, the Italian Ambassador. He's much fatter than that, really, but he looks nicer for the tapestry this way. He's a ridiculous creature, so grand that it's a wonder he doesn't expire of his own grandeur; and he has always to have everything a little larger and finer than anyone else. That is why he is carrying an eagle, instead of a hawk or falcon, like the others.'

'*I* think he looks kind,' whispered Perdita.

'Oh, he is. He has a heart of gold. It's just his grandeur that is too big for him.'

Next came a lady and a lordling, standing very close together. He had a nice, fair, steady sort of face, and a great hound standing against his leg; and she was a butterfly creature, with an impish, wilful mouth and laughter in her eyes, wearing a gown of popinjay blue flowered with rose and saffron.

Adam said, 'These two are Mary Rose and her Duke of Suffolk.'

'Please, who are they?'

'Mary Rose was King Hal's favourite sister. But he forced her to marry old King Louis of France, though she loved the Duke of Suffolk. Charles Brandon, his name was, and he loved her. Henry always had to have his own way, you know, however much other people were hurt by it'

'Oh, poor Mary Rose!' said Perdita, looking up pitifully at the little heart-shaped face of the lady.

'Why, her story has a happy ending, after all. She was very kind to the old King; he had been very dull and lonely since his last wife died; and she woke him up and made him laugh, until he felt quite young again. And every night he stayed up, dancing and feasting, until long past midnight, and forgot his rheumatics and his wheezes, and was very happy for three whole months. Then he died, because he was really too old to dance all night and hawk all day. Spiteful people said she had worn him out on purpose, but anyway, the old King had had a very happy three months, and Mary Rose came home again, and married her Duke, and they lived happily ever after.'

Perdita gazed up with admiration at Mary Rose, and as the candle-flame flickered it seemed to her that the laughter flickered in the eyes of the tapestry Princess.

The next person was the white hart with the crucifix between his antlers.

'Shall we invite him to our revels?' asked Adam.

'Yes, please! And the hounds, and the hawks,' said Perdita; and before following Adam again, she reached up to pat the sleek side of the white hart.

There was a brown man—brown eyes, brown hair and russet-brown tunic and hose—his head turned eagerly to watch the hawk he had just flown from his wrist.

Adam said, 'May I present Sir Hugh Willoughby? Robin will have told you all about him.'

Perdita gazed lovingly up at the brown man. '*Dear* Sir Hugh Willoughby!' said she; and she reached up and patted him, too, just as she had patted the white hart.

'Now, *this* is the Dowager Duchess of Devonshire. Doesn't she look sour? But I'm afraid we shall have to invite her, or she will be affronted. It is really only indigestion; she's a martyr to indigestion, and it always makes her look like that.'

Adam moved on again, and the candle-shine fell golden on a tall, slender lordling in green, with red hair and dark eyes set a little slant-wise in his face, like a fawn's. He was holding two great white hounds in leash, their muzzles raised, and their ears pricked forward, showing the red linings.

'Look!' said Adam, in a deep, thrilling whisper. 'Oh look, Perdita! Here is Gwyn Ap Nudd, Ambassador from the Court of Elfland. Green is

the fairies' colour, and so is red-and-white-together, and by those colours in man or hound you may always know the Lordly Ones.'

Perdita gave a little, excited gasp, and cuddled closer against Adam's arm; and the candle-light shimmered around the very last of the Tapestry Ladies. She was shy and sweet, in a gown of grey and amber, with her hair netted in a golden mesh, and her eyes big and shadowy, and on her fist a little peregrine falcon that she was stroking with one gentle finger.

'Here is Joyeuse,' Adam said—'Mistress Joyeuse Tamlyn, one of Anne's Ladies. She's country bred, and as strange to the ways of King Henry's Court as Gwyn Ap Nudd himself. And you know, Perdita, I believe that when Gwyn Ap Nudd goes back to the Lordly People she will go with him, out into the dew and the scent of honeysuckle and the golden midsummer moonshine, and leave no footprints behind her.'

'How lovely for her!' breathed Perdita. 'Oh, how lovely, lovely!'

'Shall you like our guests, my Lady Perdita?'

'Yes.'

'Then make ready to receive them.' Adam set the candle back on the smoke-hood, and snuffed it carefully; then he made up the fire and pinched out all the other candles; and as the little blue wisps of smoke curled upwards from them, he turned to the warm gloom which now filled the tapestry end of the room, and held wide his arms. 'Oh,

my Lords and Ladies! The lights are lit in Samarkand, and the minstrels have tuned their viols and rebecs. The ball awaits you. Oh, my Lords and Ladies, come!'

There was a rustling and a fluttering and the soft sound of laughter among the shadows; and next moment the tapestry Lords and Ladies came stepping down from their flowery forest, with their hawks on their fists and their hounds behind them, and the white hart with the crucifix between his antlers trotting in their midst.

They thronged the firelit parlour, gay as a cloud of butterflies; and, one by one, Adam presented them to Perdita. Seignor Leonardo postured on stout legs, bowing preposterously low. Gwyn Ap Nudd bent his tall head to her, spreading his arms behind him in a way that made her think of wings. The ladies curtseyed, Anne with a sweep and swirl of golden skirts, the Dowager Duchess of Devonshire with rigid decorum. All of them came and bowed or curtseyed to Perdita; and Perdita spread her silvery skirts, and curtseyed back. The hounds came and licked her fingers with warm, rough tongues, and the falcons bobbed their little, hooded heads, and rang the silver bells on their legs; and lastly came the white hart, with the crucifix glimmering golden between his antlers, and pawed the ground in front of Perdita, and bowed his head to her.

'Oh! Oh, you darling!' cried Perdita, and she bent forward and stroked his soft neck.

Then the dancing began.

Adam came to Perdita, and took her hand, and said, 'Mistress Perdita, will you dance with me?'

And Perdita said, 'Yes, please.'

And neither of them even noticed Adam's lame foot.

The walls of the firelit parlour dissolved away in a golden haze of a thousand candles, and the Pharisees fluttered down for a nearer view, and Adam's whistling became the music of lutes and virginals for them to dance to; and they paced and circled among the gay Lords and Ladies, treading stately and complicated measures that they made up as they went along.

The time passed in a kind of dream, and Perdita could never quite remember afterwards all the lovely things they had done—she and Adam and the tapestry Lords and Ladies. But she did remember that they had danced a lot, and that one of the tunes they danced to was Greensleeves, and that they had played games like Hot-Cockles and Hoodman Blind, in which everyone had joined except Seignor Leonardo Franchesco Del Buonorotti and the Dowager Duchess of Devonshire, who were both too grand.

But the loveliest parties have to come to an end sometime, even balls in Samarkand the Golden; and at last Adam pulled aside a corner of the faded golden curtains, and then let them fall again, and turned back to Perdita.

'We have used up our magic, Madam Perdita,

and if you are to be home before dark, as we promised your mother, we had better start.' He stretched, and looked round him, like someone who has just woken up. 'Look, the tapestry folk have gone already.'

And Perdita saw that they *had* gone, though she had not seen them go. 'They didn't even say good-bye!' she said, wonderingly.

'They never say good-bye,' Adam told her. 'They just come—and go.'

Perdita gave a small sigh—quite a happy sigh—and looked down at her sheep's-russet dress and sensible shoes. She did regret the silver farthingale and crimson slippers, but it had been lovely to have them, even for a little while.

Adam fetched her cloak and bundled it round her. Then he pulled back the golden curtains and opened the window. The wild wind went roaring past, and the dusk looked blue, because their eyes were so used to the red and saffron of the firelight.

'Are we going through the window?' asked Perdita delightedly.

Adam said, 'Of course. The front door is no way to leave Samarkand.' And he climbed out through the window, across the broad sill, and turned back to help Perdita. 'Besides,' said he, 'there's a little magic left, and if you come this way you can take it with you. Magic always gets rubbed off in going through a front door.'

So Perdita scrambled on to the sill; and he lifted her down into the little herb-garden below the

BULAHDELAH CENTRAL SCHOOL

window, and caught her hand. They went down a narrow path between rosemary bushes that tossed wildly in the windy twilight, and came to a low, fairy-seeming door in the wall. The little door let them through into the orchard beyond and slammed behind them as the wind hurled itself round the corner of the wall. The wind was piping wild music in the branches of the apple-trees, and the long orchard grass lay over in silvery swathes, as Adam and Perdita scurried through, hand in hand. They came to a hedge, and a final scramble brought them through on to the road, and, breathless and laughing, they turned towards the lights of the village.

'I do hope Joyeuse will go with Gwyn Ap Nudd,' Perdita cried above the wind. 'I *liked* Gwyn Ap Nudd.'

'I am sure she will,' Adam shouted back.

They did not speak any more until they were round the corner by the church and sheltered from the wind by its squat Norman tower.

Then Perdita said, 'It was a *lovely* party.'

And Adam said, 'It was a good party, wasn't it, Perdita?'

And then the Rectory door opened, and candle-light streamed out on to the muddy road, and Perdita's mother appeared in the doorway.

'Here you are, then, my dears,' she said. 'I thought you would have been quite blown away! Adam, you will come in, won't you? Robin should be home any moment.'

Adam stood on the edge of the candle-light, with Perdita's hand in his, and said, 'No, I won't come in, thank you, Mistress Pettle. Will you tell Robin I'll be over on Thursday?' He let go of Perdita's hand, and said 'Good night, little maiden.'

And Perdita dropped him a bobbing curtsey, and said, 'Good night, Adam, and thank you for the party.'

And Mistress Pettle said, 'It *has* been kind of you, Adam.'

And Adam laughed, and bowed with a flourish, and limped blithely off into the wind and the gathering darkness.

Then Perdita's mother swept her into the warm quietness of the hall, and shut the door. 'Was it a nice party, sweetheart?' she asked.

'It was a *beautiful* party!'

'And what did you do?'

'We had black-cherry preserve,' said Perdita, 'and we played games, and it was nice.'

She never told anyone about Samarkand the Golden, or about Anne Boleyn who was always laughing, even when she was afraid, or about Mary Rose, or the funny ridiculous Italian Ambassador, or any of the Tapestry Folk. She never quite knew how much of that afternoon had been Adam's magic, and how much the Pharisees, and how much a kind of glorified make-believe. But years later, when she was old and grown-up, she learned how, whether Samarkand and the tapestry folk were magic or make-believe, Adam had discovered them

long before she ever knew him—when he was a lonely little boy. And then she understood that he had let her into his most private secret, that January afternoon, just as Robin had done when he told her about the ship with the white sails and the painted figure-head and the culverin in the waist.

VII

GREAT-AUNT PHOEBE AND THE SWAN CHILDREN

THE end of the Christmas holidays came, and the boys went back to school. And quite soon it began to be spring. The buds waxed fat on every twig of every tree in Pidwidgeon Wood, the snowdrops were over, and the first of the new double primroses were shaking out their yellow frills in the Rectory garden. All the world was dancing in the gay winds of March; and Perdita's mother started spring cleaning.

Then suddenly news came to Broomhill—news that set the whole village bubbling over with excitement.

The Queen's Grace was coming that way on her summer travels! She and all her Court! In June! She was to spend a few days with Sir John and Lady Annersly, over to Black Brendon; and to get there she would pass through Broomhill!

Perdita had known that she would come, because the Pharisees had promised, and so she was not so surprised or thrilled by the news as her family had expected her to be. But deep down inside her something began to sing a little soft hum like a kettle, because it was so nice to know that the Pharisees and the Grey Maiden were already at work on their promise to make it come true.

Gloriana was coming to Broomhill! And all the womenfolk of the village, from the Rector's wife to old Lizzy Cobbledick, who lived in a hut in Pidwidgeon Wood and could strike shingles and charm away warts, began to think about making new gowns or furbishing up their old ones with the gayest ribbons they could find in Jeremy-the-Pedlar's pack when he next came that way. The menfolk began to make plans, too; the bell-ringers planned to ring as they had never rung before, so that the Queen should ride into Broomhill to the joyous clamour of the bells. There was even some talk, among the more ambitious folk, of a pageant, like Oxford had had a while before, with all the prettiest girls of the village dressed as the spirits of the woods and rivers and bringing garlands to lay at the Queen's feet; and the Rector began to write a long address of welcome, all in Greek. (The Queen could speak Latin and Greek beautifully, and so people who could do so always made their speeches to her in one of these languages, as a compliment to her for being so learned. As the speeches were always very long, it must have been very trying for Queen Elizabeth.)

In the very middle of all this excitement, Mistress Pettle received a letter. Letters were rare and important things in those days, and the Rector and Perdita both watched her eagerly and inquiringly while she opened and read it. She read it all through carefully, and a small, worried frown began to wrinkle her forehead. When she had

finished, she looked up at the Rector, and said, 'It is from my Great-Aunt Phoebe. She says she is making a round of visits to her relations before she is too old, and proposes coming to us for a month.' She gave a little wail. 'And she says she will be with us almost as soon as her letter.'

'Well,' said the Rector, comfortingly, 'there is nothing to worry about. Just tell Tryphena to make up the guest-room bed and set another place at table.'

Then Perdita's mother stamped! She very seldom stamped, but she did it now; and her pretty russet hair began to come down with exasperation. 'You men!' she cried. 'You have no idea what there is to be done—and half the spring cleaning still to do! And she may arrive at any moment.'

'Hardly as soon as that, darling,' said the Rector. 'At her age she is not likely to travel as fast as the Queen's mails.'

'Oh, I know,' wailed Perdita's mother. 'She's almost eighty. Oh dear, oh dear! I do hope this will not be too much for her.'

The Rector smiled his slow, lop-sided smile. 'From what I remember of your Great-Aunt Phoebe,' said he, 'the question is rather, will it be too much for *us*?'

Mistress Pettle said, '*Tim!* Not in front of Perdita!' and began to laugh, trying not to.

But Perdita was no longer there. She had gone to think about the news in the apple-loft.

You will remember that Perdita's mother some-

times told her about Great-Aunt Phoebe, when she asked for a story. So she knew all about her—about how she could sing the heart out of your breast when she was young, and about the time she took off her shoe at a Court ball and threw it at the head of someone she didn't like. But she had never expected actually to *see* her. It was all very exciting, and just a little frightening, too.

Two days later Great-Aunt Phoebe arrived, riding on a placid white mare, with a slung foot-board to rest her feet on, and a depressed-looking groom riding half a length behind her.

A shrunken and shrivelled old woman she was, with a nose like a hawk, and bright, snapping black eyes, wearing a green velvet riding-dress, and a ridiculous hat with a scarlet feather in it perched on top of her head.

The Rector went forward to help her to dismount, and Mistress Pettle went after him, and Perdita followed, with the dogs at her heels.

Great-Aunt Phoebe reached the ground safely, and shook out her wide green skirts. 'You are very clumsy, Timothy,' she said in a small, precise, scolding voice. Then she turned to Perdita's mother, who had come to her with her hands held out in welcome and her hair escaping from under her coif in little sunny tendrils. 'Well, my dear,' said Great-Aunt Phoebe, 'you are not so pretty as you used to be—and I see you have not yet learned to keep your hair in order.' Then she saw Perdita. 'Well, child,' said Great-Aunt Phoebe, 'you must

be Perdita. Are you not coming to kiss me?' And she bent down and presented a rouged and wrinkled cheek.

Perdita came forward dutifully, and kissed her. Then she stood very straight, with her hands behind her back and said, 'Please, we think my Mammy is very pretty, and we *like* her hair when it comes down.'

Great-Aunt Phoebe gasped, and seemed to grow several inches taller; the Rector gave a strangled guffaw, and tried to pretend he had not; and Perdita's mother flushed a lovely bright pink, and said, 'Perdita, how *can* you!'

There was an awful silence, and then Great-Aunt Phoebe began to laugh. She laughed and laughed; and then she said in a soft brogue, very different from the precise voice she had used before, 'Ach, my bold Birdeen, 'tis the loyal little daughter ye are.'

Then Bran and Peterkin came forward, too, smiling in friendly fashion, but Great-Aunt Phoebe twitched her green skirts back from their inquiring noses, and said, 'Timothy, take away those dogs!'

The groom had gone with Billie into the stables, and Mistress Pettle swept everyone into the hall in a great fluster, wondering if she ought to punish Perdita for her rudeness or not. Finally she decided not.

It was a very uncomfortable month. Great-Aunt Phoebe scolded Billie-the-Garden about his strawberry bed, and interfered with Tryphena-the-Kitchen about dust in the corners, and treated Per-

dita's mother as though she was a rather naughty little girl, and Perdita's father as though he was an even naughtier boy. She smacked Peterkin, and was very rude about poor Bran, who had given up all attempts to grow into a hound, and instead grown into something that looked rather like a badly stuffed heraldic leopard. She said she couldn't think why the Rector kept such an ugly brute; and Bran's feelings were badly hurt, so that Perdita had to sit with her arms round his neck for all one afternoon, before he was happy again.

But despite all this, she and Perdita understood each other from the first, and got on very comfortably together. She talked to Perdita in the soft Irish brogue that she had scarcely used since she came to live in England, sixty summers before. After a while she even began to tell her stories.

One fine March day of warm sun and soft wind Great-Aunt Phoebe decided to sit in the orchard. There was a weather-stained bench to sit on there, but she did not consider it comfortable; so the Rector had to carry out a very heavy chair, and set it exactly where she directed, under the great pear-tree. Then Perdita, who had toiled along beside him carrying a footstool with tapestry flowers on its top, set it down with a thump; and Great-Aunt Phoebe seated herself, and settled her feet on the footstool, and shook out her skirts and said, 'Go away, Timothy. Perdita will stay and talk to me.'

So Perdita stayed, sitting on her heels, close to Great-Aunt Phoebe's footstool.

It was nice in the orchard. The new leaves were like tiny jets of green flame on the fruit-trees, where soon the first blossoms would be shaking out their petals; crimson-tipped apple-bloom, creamy blossom of plum and pear, starry garlands on the cherry-trees. The little wild Lenten lilies in the meadow below were blowing in the wind. Some of them had spilled up into the Rectory orchard, and were dancing in the long grass, with the wind-tossed shadows of the apple-trees for dancing partners; and Perdita began to watch them.

Great-Aunt Phoebe brought out a wisp of embroidery from a hanging pocket inside her skirt, and began to stitch at it. She did not seem in any hurry to talk; and so Perdita did not talk either, but went on watching the Lenten lilies dancing in their yellow kirtles; and presently she began to hum to herself.

For a little while Great-Aunt Phoebe continued stitching in silence; then she said, ''Tis a pretty voice ye have, Macushla.'

Perdita stopped humming, and looked up. 'Have I, Great-Aunt?' she said. 'How nice!'

'Ye have indeed then. Though, mind ye, 'tis not such a one as I had when I was young.'

'Oh, no, Great-Aunt,' said Perdita.

'It's meself could sing as sweet as a thrush in the woods of Tara, and him with the day-spring in his heart,' said Great-Aunt Phoebe, with an odd, tilting softness in her voice. 'There was a young man once used to say I was Fionula, the daughter of

Lir, for no one else could have sung the heart out of his breast. Ach, but me father had him ducked in the horse-pond.'

'Oh, *why*?' asked Perdita, hoping for a story.

'Just to discourage him.'

Perdita waited hopefully, but Great-Aunt Phoebe did not say any more about the young man; instead, after a little while, she said, 'Will I tell ye about Fionula?'

Perdita would really rather have heard more about the young man in the horse-pond, but she loved any sort of story, as you know; so she said 'Please!' and settled herself more comfortably to listen.

Great-Aunt Phoebe rolled her embroidery into a ball and dropped it into the long grass, where someone else would have to hunt for it presently.

Then she began to tell Perdita the story of

THE CHILDREN OF LIR

'Now, 'tis about the Danaans that I must tell ye first, or ye will not be understanding my story at all at all.

'The Danaans came to Ireland long ago; so long ago that 'twas quite a different shape, and had but three lakes in it. They were taller and more beautiful than mortal folk, and they never grew old or died, though 'twas often enough they were killed by accident, or in battle, even by mortals. The men were great hunters and warriors, and the

spears of them were as bright as summer lightning, and their chariots shone like the sun; and the women were tall and lovely, with the skin of them as white as hawthorn bloom, and the eyes of them as blue as wild hyacinths. Man or woman alike, they sang so sweet that they could draw the very hearts out of all who heard them. And many of them had the gift of magic, so they did.

'But at last and at last, after Themselves had ruled Ireland for a thousand years, there came a new race out of the west, in long, many-oared, bright-sailed ships, and they vanquished the mighty Danaans, and they but mortal men, and ruled Ireland in their place.

'But the Danaans did not leave Ireland altogether to the Milesians (for 'twas so the newcomers were called). They left the mortal part of the land; ach, but they made an invisible kingdom for themselves in the heart of it. The Milesians saw them no more, 'tis true; but where mortals could see only ruined walls and green mounds, and domes of bramble and dog-rose, and the shapes of old earthworks, it's there the Danaans had their fairy palaces, and lived, and were happy. Sometimes a human would find his way into the Land of Youth, and sometimes 'twas one of Themselves would come out into the world of men. But as time went by, people began to forget who the Danaans really were, and think of them as the Shee, the Lordly Ones, who are quite another tribe.

'Well, now, long before the Milesians came,

there was a Danaan Chieftain called Lir; and 'tis himself married two sisters, so he did; first the younger, and then, after she died of a hunting spear, the elder, whose name was Oife. His first wife had given him four children—Fionula the eldest, and she a fair young maiden and the sweetest singer of all the Danaan people; and three boys, Conn, Fiachra and Hugh, who were still quite small. And Oife was jealous, because of the love that Lir had for his children, and it's herself determined to put them out of her way.

'So she set out to visit a neighbouring King called Bov the Red, and him with a red beard on him, as red as the feathers of the Hawk of Battle. And she took the children with her. Halfway in her journey, on the banks of Lake Derryvaragh, she halted, and ordered her servants to make camp for the night, for the blue dusk was creeping over the land. And when they had made camp she bade them to murder the children!

'Tis horrified the servants were. "Let ye do it yourself, Oife," said they.

'Then she laughed at them for cowards, and she took a long knife, with a sharp moonbright blade to it, and she went down to where the children were sitting, close together on the brink of the lake.

'Ach, but they saw her coming, and she with the moonbright skene in her hand; and they sprang to their feet and huddled together in fear. And Fionula put her arms around them and tried to comfort them and make them brave.

'Oife came on towards them. She raised the knife; but at the last moment she could not strike the blow that would have slain Fionula. The knife dropped upon the grass, and instead, Oife raised her hands and pointed all her fingers at the children, and they trying to face her boldly, the creatures. She began to shake like a birch-tree in the wind, and the eyes of her grew big and bright like a cat's, and the green elf-light began to glow at the tips of her fingers. Then she clapped her hands together, so sharply that the sparks flew from between her palms, and the children were no longer there!

'But in their place were four beautiful wild swans, and they floating upon the quiet waters of the Lake.

'Then Oife laid their fate upon them. "Let ye live three hundred years upon Lake Derryvaragh," said she; "and let ye live three hundred years on the Straits of Moyle; and let ye live three hundred years on the Atlantic coast, by Erris and Inisglora; and after that, when the Woman of the South is wedded to the Man of the North, 'tis yourselves shall have your own shapes again."

'Then she left them and went back to her servants, and next morning she continued her journey.

'But when she came to the court of Bov the Red, he knew by his magic arts the thing that she had done, and at once he changed her into a demon of the air; and she flew forth shrieking on the wings of the wind, and was never heard of again.

'Bov and Lir sought out the Swan Children, and heard the whole story from them, for Oife's spell could not rob them of their human speech nor their gift of lovely song. But 'twas nothing the two Kings could do to lift the spell—nothing at all at all—and they went away sadly, leaving the four swans floating together, far out on the blue heart of the Lake.

'Soon the fame of the Singing Swans had spread throughout all Ireland, and the Danaan people flocked to hear them. And the Swan Children sang as though their hearts were breaking, the sweetest, saddest singing that was ever heard. Ach, but Fionula was the sweetest singer of them all. And during all the time that the swans stayed upon Lake Derryvaragh, the harvests were good in Ireland, and every man was at peace with his neighbour.

'But at last the time came for them to leave the shelter of their inland lake, and go to serve their second three hundred years on the Straits of Moyle. Ach, and it was a sad time for them. 'Twas cruel hard the winters were, and however bad the weather, they might not come to land; so they were buffeted hither and yon by the winter gales, and the feathers of them froze to the rocks on bitter nights. But through all their sufferings Fionula comforted and encouraged her little brothers. She took the lead in all they did, and foraged for them, and gathered them together again when the storms had driven them apart; and on bitter nights 'twas

herself would be gathering them close around her, Conn at her right side, and Fiachra at her left, and little Hugh against the soft feathers of her breast; and she would be spreading her great white wings over them to keep them warm.

'Slowly the years wore away. Three hundred times the sea-pinks bloomed along the headlands, and three hundred times the rock-pools froze at the touch of winter. And then the Swan Children gladly left the cruel rocks and icy seas of the Straits of Moyle and flew across Ireland to the Atlantic coast by Inisglora.

'And there, they found a friend!

'The Milesians had come by this time, and the Danaans gone into their hidden world, and closed it with spells, against mortal folk. And 'twas one of these Milesians—a young farmer, he was, living on the shores of Erris Bay—that now befriended the Swan Children. They told him who they were, and he did all that he might to help them, so he did.

'But their friend was but a mortal man, and in the way of mortal men, he grew old and died; and the Swan Children were left friendless and alone once more, and more sick of heart than ever before. But at long, long last the final three hundred years was over. Then Fionula gathered her three brothers about her, and said to them, "Dear little brothers, the long waiting is over, and our deliverance must be near. Therefore, let us go to our father's palace, so that when these swan feathers will

be falling from us, 'tis ourselves may be already at home among the people that we love."

'"Ach yes!" cried her brothers. "Let us be going at once!"

'So they spread the great wings of them, and sailed up into the cloudy sky. Three times they circled over Erris Bay, in farewell to the memory of their friend; and then they flew away in the direction of their father's palace at the Hill of the White Field in Armagh. Below them they saw all Ireland spread out, the greenness of it splashed with all its silver lakes. On and on they flew, in single file, the long necks of them outstretched; four wild swans against the grey sky, and they with their hearts beating high within them, because they were going home.

'Ach, Achone! But when they came gliding down out of the sky, and folded up their wings at the crest of the Hill of the White Field, 'twas nothing they found there but green hillocks and gorse-bushes and old hawthorns thick with blossom, where once the palace stood.

'And all the time it was there, waiting for them, with its hangings of green and crimson upon its walls, and its warriors and maidens, its horses in the stables and milk-white hounds in the court-yard; and they as blind to it as though they had been mortal, because they had not been there when the Milesians came and the spell was made.

'For a little while they thought they must have missed their way and come to the wrong hill. And

for long and long they would be flying frantically north, south, east and west, searching the country for miles around. But at last they gave it up, and returned to the green, hillocky place where their father's palace should have been, and huddled together in the shelter of the hawthorn-trees, a forlorn, heartsick little band, and they not knowing what to do or where to go.

'Fionula gathered them close around her, as she had done so many hundreds of times, and strove to comfort them, but 'twas herself was as frightened and bewildered as the very smallest of them.

'And as they huddled there, homesick and miserable, and very afraid, what should they be hearing but the silvery sound of a chapel bell—and it the first Christian bell they had ever heard!

'"What sound was that?" asked Conn.

'"It was a bell," said Fiachra.

'"It would be calling to us," said Hugh.

'And Fionula said, "Ach then, let us be answering the call."

'So they spread their wings, and sailed away down the hill, skimming along just above the ground; and quite near the foot of the hill, half hidden in a spinney of ash and rowan and silver birch, they found a tiny chapel, with a silver bell hanging from a birch-tree beside it. The four swans alighted on the soft turf before the chapel, and waited to see what would happen, at all at all. And in a little while an old man came to

the doorway of the chapel, and looked at them in surprise. A Christian priest, he was—but they would not be knowing that, for they had never seen any priests but the Druids. They only knew that he was an old, old man, in a long dark gown, and that the face of him was kind. So they went forward, and they walking with their toes turned in, as is the way with swans; and they spread the great wings of them and bowed their slender necks before him, and told him who they were, and asked him to be kind to them.

'Then the old priest looked down at the four beautiful creatures, and the heart of him was soft with pity; so he took them in, and shared his own food and shelter with them.

'For many days the Swan Children remained with the old priest, and he told them about God, and they took part in his little services, and they singing so gloriously that their fame spread all over Ireland; so that people would be coming from far and wide to see the little chapel and hear the wonderful singing swans. And the Swan Children and the priest grew to love each other dearly.

'Well, now, about that time a Princess of Munster, and she called Deoca, which means "Woman of the South", was betrothed to a Connaught Chieftain called Lairgnen. She had heard of the singing swans (who, in all Ireland, had not?), and she would be begging Lairgnen to gain possession of them and give them to her for a betrothal gift. Ach now, Lairgnen knew well enough that he should

do no such thing, but he loved Deoca with all his heart, and 'twas nothing he could refuse her.

'So he went to the old priest, and asked him for the four swans.

'"They are not mine to give," said the old man. "They are not mine at all, at all." And however much the young Chieftain urged him, he would not give up the swans.

'At last Lairgnen grew desperate, and seized the four swans by the silver chains the priest had set about their necks, and dragged them away with him, despite all the prayers and entreaties of the old man.

'They went on and on, the Chieftain in front, with the four swans on the ends of their chains circling and fluttering above the head of him, and the old priest with his gown kilted up to the knees of him, running behind; for 'twas determined he was not to abandon his friends.

'At last they came to the Royal Palace of Munster, into the presence of the Princess herself, and she in a golden gown sitting among her maidens. Then Lairgnen strode up the Hall towards her, with the swans swerving and fluttering above the head of him; and behind him followed the priest, footsore and weary, but still determined.

'Lairgnen gave the ends of the four silver chains into the Princess's hand; and the swans sank down to the ground before her. Ach, and as their feet touched the rush-strewn floor, the enchantment was ended!

'The white swan-feathers fell away from them and drifted about the hall like snow; but instead of four beautiful Danaans standing where the swans had been, 'twas only a woman and three men, there were, and they so old and shrivelled and palsied that they seemed scarce human! In becoming Christian 'twas mortal they had become, too, for the Danaans and the Lordly People cannot be Christian; they belong to older Gods. And if ye can imagine what human beings who are nine hundred years old would be looking like, that is what the children of Lir were like now, and they lying at the Princess's feet, for they were too weak to stand.

'Lairgnen and the Princess and all her maidens fled from the place in horror; but 'twas the old priest had known what would happen, and he was not afraid. But 'tis sad he was, for he saw that in a very little while the Swan Children would die, because they were so much too old to live. So 'twas himself knelt down beside them each in turn, and signed them with the Cross; and last of all, he knelt beside Fionula, who had always been his favourite.

'Ach Achone! But the life was almost gone from her, and the voice of her so faint it might have been the dawn wind sighing through the reeds of Lake Derryvaragh.

'"Let you bury us together," said she. "And let you bury Conn at my right hand, and Fiachra at my left, and little Hugh before me; for 'twas

so it used to be on bitter nights in the Straits of Moyle, when I would be sheltering them with my wings."

'Then she died, and the white soul of her flew straight to Heaven, and her brothers Conn and Fiachra and little Hugh followed her as they had followed her all through those nine hundred years of their enchantment.

'But the poor old priest was left behind, alone, and he would be missing his Swan Children, and grieving for them to the very end of his days.'

VIII

MASTER TREBILCOCK'S RAINBOW

GREAT-AUNT PHOEBE went away, with her depressed-looking groom behind her, and spring drew on towards summer, and preparations for the Queen's visit continued apace.

The Rector had rewritten his Address of Welcome so often that it was quite perfect, and the bell-ringers had practised their peal until the people who lived in the cottages nearest to the church were almost out of their wits. There were to be all kinds of sports and junketings in the river-meadow after the Queen had gone by, and a wonderful supper in the Tithe Barn for the whole village, and for the people of other villages, who would certainly flock into Broomhill on the great day. The pageant idea had been given up, and it was decided that the Rector and the chief farmers of the parish were to greet Her Majesty as her cavalcade reached the Green, and the Rector was to read his Address of Welcome; and all the cottages were to be hung with garlands, and across the village street there was to be a white banner with 'God Bless the Queen' in scarlet letters; and all the children in their best Sunday kirtles were to throw flowers and green branches into the roadway for the litter-horses to walk upon.

And Perdita was to come forward and present a large bunch of flowers to the Queen.

When Perdita was told this, she was quite speechless with happiness, and went away down the garden by herself, looking for a few Pharisees to say thank you to. She found one among the Crown Imperials, but he was rather cross, and you must never force your company on a Pharisee when he is cross, unless you want to lose his friendship entirely. So Perdita left him to himself, and went and found a soft-smiling, pleasant person sitting astride a pink Canterbury bell, and thanked him instead, and asked him to thank the others.

Then Sir John Annersly and his Lady sent out inviting all the nobility and gentry of the countryside to a great ball in the Queen's honour, on Midsummer's Eve. The Rector and Mistress Pettle were bidden to it, and so was Robin (for of course Adam was coming home from school for the Royal visit, and Robin was coming with him), but Perdita was not bidden because she was too young. Still, she did not really mind that, because *she* was going to make her curtsey to the Queen when she passed through Broomhill, and all the bells would be ringing, and she would make her very best curtsey, and hold up the roses and tiger-lilies, and Gloriana would bend down to take them, and smile at her—ust at *her*—for that one moment, and nobody else in all the world!

One morning early in May, when the Rectory family had just finished their breakfast of crusty

bread-and-butter and honey-in-the-comb, Perdita's mother said: 'Tim, if Perdita is to present a flower-bunch to Her Majesty, and I am to go to the ball on Midsummer's Eve, do you think we might have new gowns? I have my new yellow farthingale that I worked last winter; but if I *could* have a length of grey silk for a kirtle, and perhaps just a little gold lace for trimming? And Perdita has not got a best dress for summer-time at all.'

The Rector smiled his lop-sided smile, and said, 'Very well, you shall have your new gown, darling, and so shall Perdita.'

So it was arranged that Perdita and her mother were to go into Bideford next day to get the stuff for their gowns; because that would be market day, and Farmer Yeo at the Barton always drove into Bideford Market every week, with his cart full of farm produce, and he would let them ride with him. (When Queen Elizabeth was young, people often went on journeys in carts, even rich people.)

Next morning they got up very early, and were all ready and waiting at the corner by the church when Farmer Yeo came rumbling down the lane behind Benny, the big grey cart-horse, and reined up beside them.

'Mornin', Mistress Pettle,' said Farmer Yeo, touching his battered bonnet, and jumping down to help them in. 'Mornin', l'il maid.'

'Good morning to you, Master Yeo,' said Perdita's mother, gathering up her skirts, and taking

his horny hand to steady her as she mounted into the cart.

And, 'Isn't this a *lovely* morning, Master Yeo?' said Perdita, gazing blissfully skywards as he swung her up into the cart beside her mother.

'That it be, my dear; a proper morning, sure 'nough,' replied Master Yeo, and before he climbed up himself, he handed Mistress Pettle the huge basket she had brought with her to put her shopping in.

Perdita's mother settled herself on the clean sacks and straw which he had kindly put there for them, but Perdita thought that, as she was not very tall, she would not be able to see much, right down there in the bottom of the cart, so she firmly sat herself down by the farmer, on the blue-painted side.

'You won't let me fall off, will you, Master Yeo?' she said happily.

And of course he said no, he would not, and Perdita's mother said, 'Will she not be in your way?'

'No-o. Don't 'ee be afraid o' that, Mam,' said Master Yeo.

So Perdita stayed where she was, and Master Yeo picked up the reins and said, 'Gid up, Benny!' And Benny woke out of a slight doze, and shook his head, and they were off!

Down the village street they went, past Whinworthy (with its gates shut to-day), and out on to the open road beyond.

Perdita wriggled into a more comfortable position, and began to enjoy herself—even more than before, that is. Except for the little clear space in

front, where her mother sat, the cart was quite full of farm produce, all going to be sold at Bideford market. There were green cheeses, and butter and eggs, big jars of honey, and poultry all ready plucked and trussed for cooking, and a bull calf tied up in a sack, with only his head sticking out. The calf made Perdita quite unhappy for a little while, because he looked so miserable, and she was sure he was missing his mother. But Master Yeo told her that it would certainly go to a happy home, and that calves always forgot about their mothers after a few days. So she cheered up again and began to think that Master Yeo's horse and cart must surely be the smartest in all the West Country.

The cart had been newly painted blue—a gay, boisterous sort of blue, picked out in scarlet. Benny's dappled coat gleamed with grooming in the sunlight, and his mane and tail were plaited with golden straws, and his head-band and the long loose strap across his breast and the fan-shaped collar between his great shoulders were all hung with glistening brasses shaped like stars and crescents and roses and anchors and horses.

The long, dusty road rose and fell, dipped and wound, in front of them, and Benny plodded on happily, half asleep in the sunshine, his great round hooves raising the dust in little eddies round his woolly legs, clippety-clop, cloppety-clip; and the horse-brasses jingled and chimed as sweet as silver bells above the jolting and rumbling of the cart.

The hedges were all lacey with stitchwort and eye-

BULAHDELAH CENTRAL SCHOOL

bright, and thick with May blossom that smelled of peaches and cream; and the yellow-hammers sang among the May-trees, and the larks sang in the blue sky above them; and all the world was pleased because Perdita's birthday wish was going to come true, and she was going to see the Queen, and was to have a silk gown for the occasion.

They had started so early that it was only ten o'clock or thereabouts when they rumbled and clippety-clopped and jingled across Bideford Bridge, and Master Yeo drew up on the Quay.

Perdita and her mother got down (Mistress Pettle with the big basket), and thanked him politely, and promised to be back at the corner of the bridge at three o'clock, because that was the time he wanted to start for home. Then he shook the reins, and Benny lumbered slowly into action again, and plodded off towards the Market.

Perdita and her mother had a deal of shopping to do, for there were several things they must buy as well as the silk for their new gowns—cloves and ginger, scrubbing-soap and linen thread, and lots of other things. But that first sight of the great sea-port (for Bideford *was* a great sea-port in those days) was always much too exciting to be hurried through. So they stood side by side, just where the long bridge joined the Quay, and looked down-river for a moment. The shadow of the bridge was velvety dark on the water when Perdita looked down, and the river flowed out from under the arches, flashing in the sunshine all the way, until the hills closed the

view between Bideford and Appledore, so that you could not see where the river went. But Perdita knew where it went, although she had never been to see; she knew how it flowed away and away, through the marshes and salt-flats and sand dunes, and how the Taw joined it, and the two went on together until the estuary broadened out into the Golden Bay. She knew how the shipping came and went, homing up the river to Bideford, or outward bound, over the bar and away beyond Lundy, into the west. All the shipping of the world. And one day Robin's ship would sail out over the bar, too.

There were two ships lying at anchor in mid-stream now, perhaps waiting for the tide; and there were gulls everywhere, wheeling and crying above the ships and the fishing-smacks that had just come in, and above the hustle of the Quay. And there, resting quietly beside the Quay, was the Tall Ship!

Perdita saw her at once, and gave a little hop of excitement. 'Mammy, Mammy! That ship! Oh, please do let's go and look at her!'

'We can't just yet, really we can't,' said Perdita's mother, keeping a tight hold on Perdita's hand. 'We must go and see Mistress Heard, because you know we want her to ask us to dinner, and then we have our shopping to do, and then it will be time for dinner. But we will come back and look at her afterwards, before we go home.'

'But she may have sailed by then,' said Perdita, in a small, piteous voice.

'She will not sail for a long while,' said Mistress Pettle firmly. 'Look, we will ask this man.' And she turned to a little weather-beaten sailor who leaned on the parapet quite close to them, gazing a long way off. 'If you please, Master Seaman, will that ship have sailed by this afternoon?'

The man brought his gaze back slowly from a long way off, and said, 'The *Rose of Sharon*? Her won't sail for three days yet.'

'There,' said Perdita's mother. 'Now come along, my poppet.'

'Yes,' said Perdita, quite satisfied.

They turned left and went to call on Mistress Heard. The Quay above the bridge was much quieter than the Quay below the bridge, because the big ships could not come there, and it was so narrow that Perdita thought to herself that the people who lived in the tall, narrow houses along it would be able to look out from their upstairs windows right into the water, as though the Quay were not there at all. She always thought that same thought every time she came there—not that she came there very often, of course.

Mistress Heard's house was in a little short, narrow street that led up from the Quay towards St. Mary's Church. It was a nice house, with a richly carved face, and a pot of yellow tulips in the bay window, and a door of weather-stained ship's-timbers. Mistress Heard must have seen them from the window, for the door opened even before they got to it, and she bounced out into the street, as

round and soft and pleasant as ever, and flung her arms round Perdita's mother, crying 'Judith! How lovely to see you again!'

'Rose!' cried Mistress Pettle. 'How lovely to see *you* again!' And dropped the basket.

Then Mistress Heard stooped down and planted a kiss on the very top of Perdita's little coif, and swept them both into the cobbled passage that ran straight through the house. (As the house was joined on to its neighbours at either side, there was no other way of getting Master Heard's horse through to its stable at the back, except by riding it in at the front door and out at the back door; so the passage was really more like a covered alley-way than an ordinary passage in an ordinary house.) 'I knew something nice would happen to-day,' said Mistress Heard, 'for the palm of my hand has been itching like fire all morning. Now come and set you down and have something to eat, for you have had no breakfast, I'm sure, with the early start you must have made.'

Mistress Pettle shook her head. 'We can't stay just now, Rose.' And she told Mistress Heard about the new gowns for the Queen's visit. 'So you see,' she ended, 'we must go and do our shopping; but we thought, Perdita and I, that perhaps you might bid us to dine with you?'

'My dear soul, did you think I'd let you dine anywhere else? Go and do your shopping, then, and come back when you have done,' said Mistress Heard. And then she put one finger under Per-

dita's chin, and asked, 'Do you like honey-cake and cream?'

'Please!' said Perdita.

'You shall have a little one all to yourself, with sugared cherries on top,' promised Mistress Heard. And she called after them as they set off down the narrow street, 'Dinner is at noon, my dears.'

Perdita looked back. 'We will be very punctual,' she called.

As soon as they were round the corner on to the Quay she looked to make sure that the Tall Ship had not sailed, after all. There she was, resting quietly beside the crowded Quay; and Perdita kept her eye on the tapering masts and furled sails as she scurried along beside her mother, until they reached the High Street and turned up into it, and the Tall Ship was lost to view.

They went to Master Truscott's for the cloves and ginger; and then they dived into a maze of narrow back-ways and called on Dame Honeyset for the linen thread. There were other things they bought, too; but Perdita quite lost count of them as she trotted beside her mother in and out of little rabbit-warren shops, and up and down narrow, cobbled streets where the houses almost met overhead and the river sparkled blue through every gap and at every street-end, and farmers smelling of the land and sailors smelling of the sea jostled each other up and down.

At last they came out into the High Street again. Right to the very top of High Street they climbed,

threading their way through the market-day crowds, and there they found Master Humphrey Trebilcock's establishment. You always felt that you had found Master Trebilcock's establishment, however well you had known where it was, because it was set so far back between an inn and a saddler's that it did not seem to be there at all, until you were right in front of it. It was a narrow, tall shop, with a steep gable like a finger pointing skywards, and a low, dark-browed doorway, and it looked very dingy, and rather dirty. Inside it was little and dark, with a low ceiling full of blackened beams, and the small window was so full of cobwebs that the light which managed to filter through it was quite grey.

Perdita just had time to see that the shop was full of bolts of sheep's-russet and striped calico, and boxes that might contain almost anything, and looked as though they had not been opened for years, when Master Trebilcock came through a little door at the back of the shop, and stood looking at them inquiringly.

He was not at all the sort of person you would expect to find in such a grubby little shop. He was tall and narrow and bent, with a gentle, learned sort of face, and a high, domed forehead and a nose like an eagle, and thin, beautiful hands, and he wore a long black gown and a close ruff.

Mistress Pettle said, 'Good-day to you, Master Trebilcock; could we see some silks, please?'

Master Trebilcock smiled faintly, and bowed

slightly, and opening the door behind him again, stood aside for Perdita and her mother to go past him into the back shop. The back shop was not dark and dingy like the front one, for sunshine slanted in through the little window, and turned the dust to dancing golden motes; and this was where Master Trebilcock kept his treasure of silks and satins—the best stock of such things in all North Devon, as everybody knew.

He began to take down the stuffs and toss them about, playing with them lovingly, letting them run over his beautiful hands. It was in vain for Mistress Pettle to say, 'Something in pale grey; and I think a blue tabby, if you have one, for the little girl.' Master Trebilcock had lovely things in his shop, and he wanted to show them to her; he always loved showing them to people, and it was not every day that he had the chance. So he went on tossing out the gleaming folds, holding them up to catch the dusty sunlight: crimson figured Genoese velvets, cloths of silver and gold, cypress as fine as mist and as white as snow; brocaded silks of saffron and rose, jade green and royal purple and popinjay blue. And Perdita watched enchanted; it was like being in the heart of the rainbow.

Perdita's mother had bought silk from Master Trebilcock before (though not often, because the Rector was not rich), and that was how she had known that there would not be time to see the Tall Ship *and* do their shopping before dinner. But at

last she did get what she wanted. Grey damask for herself; it would look lovely over the yellow farthingale with the pansies and Mary-buds. And for Perdita's little kirtle, blue silk tabby, as joyous as a kingfisher's mantle. Perdita was completely satisfied, and she thanked Master Trebilcock, and explained about the Queen.

He nodded, and smiled gently, and said, 'Aye, aye, little maid,' in a voice as gentle as his smile. And that was almost the only time he spoke all the while they were there. Then he folded up the damask and the tabby, rather sadly, because he hated selling his treasures (it was only showing them that he liked), and stowed them into Mistress Pettle's basket, on top of the cloves and ginger and linen thread and scrubbing-soap.

Then Mistress Pettle gave him his money, and they bade him good-day and went out into the street again. Perdita halted for a moment on the door-sill and glanced back, right through the dingy outer shop into the one beyond; and the last she saw of Master Trebilcock he was standing in the dusty sunshine from his little window, holding up a piece of greeny-gold brocade, and smiling at it as he watched the light play up and down its folds.

IX

THE TALL SHIP

PERDITA and her mother went back to Mistress Heard's house in a great hurry, so as not to be late, and arrived at the front door just in time to hear a clock somewhere behind it strike twelve. A lovely smell of cooking was wafting out into the street.

'Be-eautiful!' said Perdita, sniffing.

'Greedy poppet!' said her mother, trying to poke back her hair, which had begun to come down again, with all the hurry and flurry of the morning's shopping.

Then the door opened, and Mistress Heard appeared. 'Come along in, my dears,' she said. 'Dinner is just ready, and my good man will be home at any moment.'

So they went in and put the basket in a corner; and Mistress Heard helped Mistress Pettle to pin up her hair again; and a moment later Master Heard came in, with a lean, goaty old man called Master Braund, whom he had brought home to dinner. There was a deal of talking and explaining, and Perdita was chucked under the chin a great many times (which she did not like very much). And Jenny-the-Kitchen set another mug and pewter plate for Master Braund; and then they all trooped

into the dining parlour, and Master Heard said Grace, and they sat down to dinner. There was no 'silence at meals' rule in the Heard household, because there were no children, the four sons being all grown-up and away at sea; and so Mistress Heard and Mistress Pettle chattered softly and ceaselessly about all the things that had happened since they last saw each other, while at the other end of the table Master Heard and Master Braund were deep in a business discussion of their own, and Perdita was left in peace to eat her dinner and look about her, and listen to whichever conversation interested her most. The menfolk's conversation was the nicest to listen to, she decided, because it was dotted with lovely words and the names of ships—words like Muscovy and cinnamon, Bokhara, San Domingo and Joyous Venture.

Because most of the ground floor was warehouse, the dining parlour was very small, with a low, many-beamed ceiling and panelled walls and a big window looking into a walled garden. The garden was mostly full of an old fig-tree, and so the room was full of a flickery, greenery-gold light, because of the sunshine through the leaves—the sort of light you might expect to find under a sunlit sea.

There was pigeon pie for dinner, with crusty bread to sop up the gravy, and afterwards there was the promised honey-cake; a big one for the grown-ups, and for Perdita a little private one with five sugared cherries on top, sitting on a little private

plate. The plate was made of earthenware, glazed pale grey, with a bright green rim, and knots of gay, blobby flowers all over it—yellow and blue and green and scarlet. Mistress Heard said her son Henry had brought it home from Holland for her; and Perdita thought it was the prettiest thing she had ever seen, and she hoped very much that one day, when he was grown-up and went on voyages, Robin would bring *her* back a plate just like it.

When dinner was over, Master Heard and his friend went off about their business again, and Mistress Heard and Perdita and her mother all went upstairs to the room over the warehouse, with the yellow tulips in the window, which was the parlour. Mistress Heard and Mistress Pettle seated themselves in the tall-backed chairs on either side of the empty hearth; and just for a moment Perdita was horribly afraid that her mother had forgotten about the Tall Ship; but then she looked up and caught Perdita's eye, and smiled a tiny smile that said as plain as plain, 'No, I have not forgotten.' So Perdita knew that it was all right; and she went and sat on the broad, cushioned window-seat beside the yellow tulips, and began to look at a book she found there. It was called 'Foxe's Book of Martyrs' and on almost every other page it had woodcuts of ladies and gentlemen being burned at the stake.

In a little while Mistress Pettle got up and shook out her skirts, and said, 'Rose dear, we must be going.'

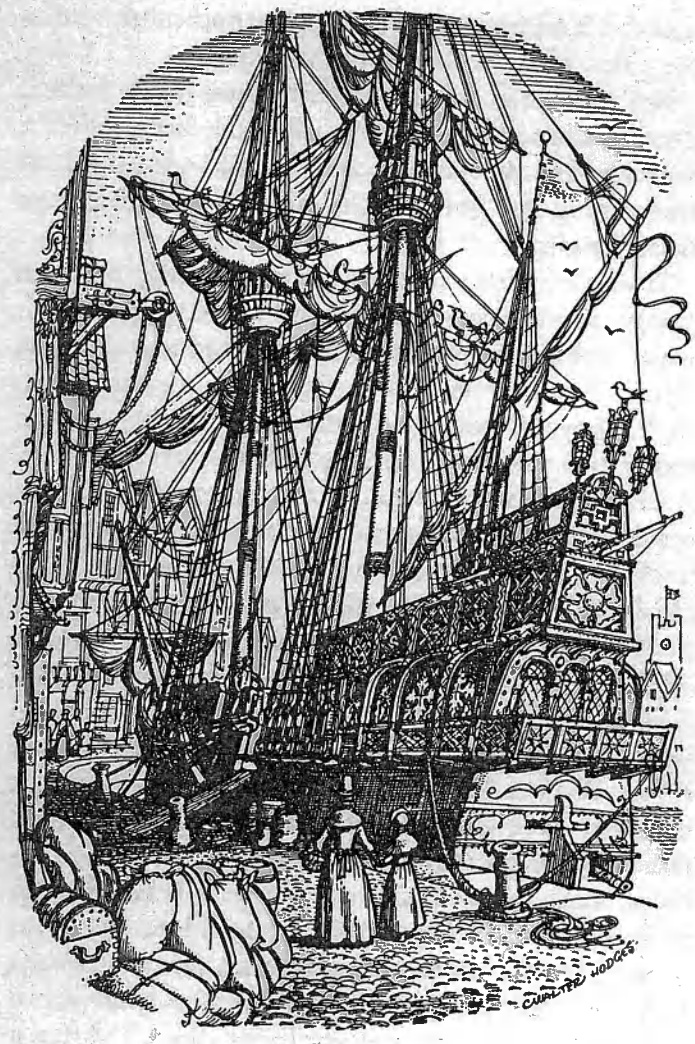
'Oh, why?' asked Mistress Heard. 'Your farmer can't be going home from market yet awhile, surely?'

But Perdita's mother explained about the Tall Ship, and of course Mistress Heard quite understood.

So they all went down to the front door, and collected the basket, and swept each other billowing curtsies, and Perdita said thank you politely for the honey cake with the cherries on top, and Mistress Heard and Perdita's mother kissed and said how lovely it had been to see each other. Then Mistress Heard went indoors again, and Perdita and her mother took hands and ran, straight for the blue sparkle of the river at the far end of the street.

The Tall Ship was still there! Perdita gave a little gasp of relief, and slackened speed.

Past the bridge they went down on to the main Quay, which was crammed full of life and movement and bustle. There were seamen with gold rings in their ears, and merchants and little boys and dogs; there were bales of merchandise and coils of rope, and ancient guns embedded muzzle-down in the Quay, for ships to tie up to. There was a smell of rope and tar and paint and timber and salt water, all mingling together into the most exciting smell in all the world—the smell of adventure itself. There were tall warehouses and many bay-windowed, steep-gabled taverns along the Quay, each tavern with its swing sign—a mermaid, a black swan, a golden glove. And always there



was the Tall Ship, growing larger and more real as they threaded their way towards her.

At last they reached her bows, and halted. Perdita slipped her hand gently from her mother's, and for her the crowds and merchandise and all the coming and going of the sea-port were forgotten in an instant.

It was low tide, the river running quietly between yellow sandbanks, and the bulwarks of the ship's waist were hardly above the cobblestones of the Quay, but her poop and forecastle rose up high, high above Perdita, with all her weather-stained paint and gilding proud as battle-scars upon her. And under her bowsprit Perdita found the figure-head—the Rose of Sharon herself. She was battered and stained by the seas of all the world, her blue cloak faded, and her golden hair salt-blackened; and she was lovely, with the slender, hardy loveliness of her ship; and Perdita's heart went out to her.

But there was so much to see; and in a little while Perdita turned to examine the rest of the ship. She walked slowly along her side, stepping carefully over the hawsers by which she was made fast to the ancient guns on the Quay, past the gang-plank that bridged the narrow gap between ship and shore, until she came to the high, beautiful stern, with its three poop-lanterns that must look like great yellow flower-buds when dusk came down and the tarred rope was lit inside them. After a bit she turned and walked slowly back, until she came once again to the Rose of Sharon, still gazing

down into the water from her place under the bow-sprit.

'I've come back, Rose of Sharon,' she whispered.

The figure-head said nothing. But a little tremor of reflected sunshine from the water that lapped beneath her shimmered over her face and made tiny blurred sun-spots on her blue cloak, and Perdita took that for an answer.

She stood on the edge of the quay for quite a long time, looking at the Rose of Sharon, and wishing that she was near enough to touch.

Then suddenly something made her step back and look upwards towards the tall masts and delicate spider's-web tracery of rigging far, far overhead.

There was a man leaning over the forecastle rail, just above her—a brown man, who might be quite young or quite old, for all Perdita could tell; for his thin, pointed face looked young, but his hair was badger-grey. He wore no ruff or partlet-strip, and his faded violet doublet was open at the top, showing his brown throat. Like most sailor-men, he wore gold rings in his ears, and from one of them hung a chunk of raw turquoise; and his ears themselves were a very strange shape, the lobes being pointed just as though they had been trimmed, as people used to trim the ears of bull-dogs. His eyebrows were much blacker than his hair, and quirked upwards at the outer ends in a very odd way. Altogether, he was the most fascinating person Perdita had ever seen.

So she gazed up at him, very gravely, and he

gazed down at her, with the corners of his mouth twitching upwards in laughter-lines towards his pointed ears. Then a great and terrible hope rose inside Perdita. She spread out her skirts and curtseyed, deeply and most beseechingly, without ever taking her eyes from the man's face.

The man said, 'Would you like to come aboard, my honey?'

'Please!' said Perdita, in a small, husky voice.

'Go along to the gang-plank, then.'

Perdita went. She went so quickly that she had already got there when her mother's voice behind her, laughing and exasperated, said, 'Perdita!'

Perdita whirled round and faced her mother, twisting her hands in her kirtle, her small face quite white with her longing to go on board the Tall Ship. 'Mammy! Oh, Mammy, do say I may!'

Then the man had come down the forecastle ladder and across the deck. He sprang up on to the head of the gang-plank, and stood there, looking down at the two of them, with one hand resting caressingly on the hilt of the long rapier at his hip. 'I will take great care of her, Mistress,' he assured Perdita's mother.

'Well,' said Mistress Pettle, uncertainly; and then, 'Very well; but she is not to go below deck, out of my sight.'

'She shall not,' the man promised. 'Just you set down on that bale, ma'am, and make your mind easy.' And then, to Perdita, holding out his hand, 'Come up, my bird.'

Perdita came up on the instant. She glimpsed a narrow strip of dark water far below, and then the man caught her and lifted her down. She was on board the *Rose of Sharon*, with the lovely live feeling of the deck (which is so different from the solid feel of land) under her feet! She took one long, wide-eyed look all round her, and asked, 'Is she yours?'

'Aye, she's mine.'

'My brother Robin——' began Perdita, and broke off. She had been going to say 'My brother Robin is going to have a ship of his own, one day'. But she remembered, just in time, that it was a secret, and changed to 'is going to sea when he grows up.'

'Is he?' said the ship man. 'He could do no better.'

She nodded. 'Yes—that is why I have always wanted to see a ship, near to. I never have before.'

'Well, now that you are seeing a ship near to what would you like to look at first?'

'Everything, please,' said Perdita, quite simply.

So he showed her everything—everything on deck, that is, because he was a conscientious man in some ways, and did not forget that he had promised the little maid's mother not to take her below.

Sometimes they met other sailors, but not often, because there was only what the master called a skeleton crew on board just then; Perdita hardly noticed them, she was too intent on the ship and

the ship's master. At his heels she trotted hither and yon, clambered up and down ladders (in a way that was more safe than seaman-like), and explored every nook and cranny of main-deck, poop and forecastle. She examined the four grim black culverin in the waist, and the demi-culverin and the little falcons and murdering-pieces for close fighting in the castles; and the man with pointed ears showed her how the big guns were loaded through the muzzle, while the small ones were breech-loaders, and allowed her to pat their round, smooth sides. She stood close beneath the masts, staring up through the spars and spider-web masses of rigging high, high above, until she was quite giddy, while the man talked of foremast and mainmast, mizzen and Bonaventure mizzen, and explained that the *Rose of Sharon* could sail closer to the wind than any other vessel of the port of Bideford, because of the lateen sails with which the mizzen and Bonaventure mizzen were rigged. And Perdita listened entranced, while she watched a black-capped sea-gull that had alighted on the topsail spar, high against the blue. She did not understand very much of what he said about the sails, but the lovely words he was using sang themselves over her head, with the humming of the faint breeze in the rigging. 'Bonaventure mizzen mast—Bonaventure mizzen . . .'

And in between whiles the man told her other things, too—strange things It all began while they were examining the helm. Perdita put out one

finger, and stroked the spokes of the great wheel; they were worn and polished with handling, and she began to wonder about the helmsman, and about the sea-lanes that the *Rose of Sharon* had followed under his guiding hand. She said, 'Please, where has she come from?'

'From Antwerp,' answered the ship's master. ''Tis the Flemish wool trade we follow—the *Rose of Sharon* and myself.'

'Oh,' said Perdita, blankly. She had thought of the Tall Ship winging out of the west, with a cargo of gold and ivory from dream islands washed by sapphire seas. *Not* the Flemish wool trade!

He saw her disappointment, and his strange eyebrows quirked upwards. 'Not romantic enough, eh, Ladybird? Well, I have brought strange cargoes from strange ports, before now.'

'Tell me,' demanded Perdita.

So he told her. 'Red wine from Gascony, and ivory from the dark shores of Africa, and many's the time I have taken copper and kersey-cloth to Persia, and brought back spices and frankincense, and raw yellow silk for ladies' gowns, and good red yew-wood for English long-bows. Furs from Muscovy, too, in exchange for scarlet and purple cloth; and gold and silver from the New World. It's a brave place, is the New World, and brave things to see in it. Aye, and strange and terrible things, too.' He put up a hand, and touched the lump of turquoise in his ear-ring. 'Look at my ears, honey. I was not born with pointed ears. When

the kings of those parts sacrifice a man to the sun (for 'tis the sun they worship as their God), they trim his ears like this, before they kill him; 'tis so all men may see that I have fought for my life on the Inca death-stone.'

Perdita gazed at him open-mouthed. 'How did you escape?' she breathed.

'Why, at the last moment there was an eclipse of the sun. There was I, stretched out, with four stark-naked priests holding me down, and a fifth—all greased and powdered over with gold dust, he was, so that he looked like a living golden statue—standing over me, with the knife raised high in his hand; and then suddenly the sun began to go out. The golden priest, and the King, and all the people, they thought their God was angry at being given a white man for a sacrifice. The darkness grew, and they all ran away to shelter from his wrath. Ah, and I ran, too! 'Tis a long way from the Inca City I was when the sun came out again.'

So it went on, all the while they were exploring the ship. And when Perdita had seen most everything there was to see on deck and was leaning over the bulwarks, watching the slow-flowing river as it slapped along the sides of the Tall Ship, the man with the pointed ears was still stuffing her head with tales of the freezing perils of the North-east Passage to Russia, and of Czar Ivan the Terrible in his Cossack Court among the snows of Moscow; and of sea-fights and sea-serpents, and golden islands whose white coral shores were washed by

seas so clear that you could look right down and see scarlet and purple fishes sitting on seaweed trees far below, and singing as sweetly as linnets. And of kings in golden armour and cloaks of humming-bird feathers, who drank a strange liquid called chocolate, out of golden cups which they afterwards threw into the Royal Lake, never drinking from the same cup twice.

And Perdita listened and listened, until she seemed to see all the things he spoke of, below the flash and sparkle of the river, as it flowed towards the sea.

It seemed to her that she could not have been more than ten minutes on board the *Rose of Sharon* when she heard her mother calling, 'Perdita! Perdita!'

'There is your mother calling,' said the man with pointed ears. 'Time to go, my honey.'

So Perdita heaved a little sigh, and shook out her skirts, and the man took her hand, and they went back to the gang-plank.

Perdita's mother had picked up her basket, and risen from the bale on which she had been patiently sitting all this while. 'Master Yeo is coming down the High Street. We must hurry, Poppet!' she called, and she smiled at the ship's master, and said, 'Thank you very much. I hope she has not been a trouble to you.'

'None in the world, ma'am,' said he, and he helped Perdita up on to the gang-plank, and crossed over with her to the Quay. He bowed to Mistress

Pettle, with one hand on the silver hilt of his rapier, suddenly a very grand gentleman—a little like Adam. Then he put two fingers under Perdita's chin and tipped her face up gently. (It was quite different from being chucked under the chin by Master Braund, and she did not mind at all.) He said, 'Don't forget the things I have told you. Good-bye, Ladybird.'

'I shan't *ever* forget!' said Perdita. 'Good-bye, Ship-man,' and she dropped him a bobbing curtsey.

Then he went back across the gang-plank, and Perdita slipped her hand into her mother's, and they went away up the Quay towards the bridge, where Master Yeo and Benny had reined up and were waiting for them. She looked back once, and the Tall Ship was still lying there, quietly, just as she had first seen her, and the Rose of Sharon herself, in her blue cloak, still leaning forward to watch the water from her place under the bowsprit. (She had half thought that they would have melted away, like the Danaan Kingdom that Great-Aunt Phoebe had told her about.)

But though the Tall Ship and the figure-head were still there, there was no sign of the man with pointed ears.

All the way home Perdita was in a kind of blissful dream. She came out of it now and then, to say, 'The *Rose of Sharon* can sail closer to the wind than any other ship of the port of Bideford,' or 'Mammy, do you know, there are scarlet and purple fishes in the seas, that sit on branches of seaweed

and sing like linnets,' and then went back into her dreams again.

When Master Yeo set them down at the corner by the church, the Rector came out to meet them, with Bran and Peterkin at his heels. Perdita only just remembered to drop her father a little curtsey for politeness, before she kilted up her skirts and ran to him. 'Father! There was a ship, and I went on board her! She can sail closer to the wind than any other ship of the port of Bideford—and my new gown is going to be blue—and the master has pointed ears: they weren't born like that; the Incas trimmed them!'

Mistress Pettle saw the dazed look on the Rector's face, and began to laugh. Perdita did not even notice. She had gone back into her dream again.

X

GLORIANA PASSES BY

PERDITA'S mother spread out the grey damask and the blue tabby on the table in the dining parlour, and pinned and snipped, and snipped and pinned, with Tryphena to help her, and Perdita to hold the pin-cushion. Then she began to sew the blue tabby, and Perdita was always being called in from the garden to stand in her petticoats, turning slowly round and round, while the new gown was fitted. At last it was finished, and Perdita's mother put it on her, and patted and pulled it into shape, and took her into her own room and stood her in front of the long, polished steel mirror, and said, 'There!'

Perdita looked at herself gravely in the mirror. There she was, in her new gown. The stiff, tight bodice was cut low and square (very grown-up); and the sleeves were big and puffed out, and the wide skirt was like a huge blue flower-bell. When the day of days came, she would have a close ruff of lawn, and a little lawn coif, both edged with bone lace; but even without them it was a very grand and lovely gown, and Perdita was sure that there would not be a lady in all the Queen's train who would have a prettier one. She spread out her silken skirts, and swept herself a low curtsey—the

sort that she would make, presently, to the Queen's Grace. She could not see all of the curtsey, because as she went down her reflection slid out of the bottom of the mirror. But her blue skirts billowed in the most satisfactory way.

There were quite a lot of scraps over from making the blue gown, and so, while Mistress Pettle made up the grey damask, Perdita contrived a new farthingale for Jessica, so that she should not feel left out of things at all.

Midsummer drew nearer, and with it the Queen's visit, which was to take place three days before. Everything was settled and ready for her coming, and for the merry-makings, and the great supper in the Tithe Barn that was to follow. Master Yeo had given a bullock to be roasted whole for that supper, and Mistress Pettle and the farmers' wives had been busy for days, baking apple-cake and frumenty, so that the village might feast worthily in the Queen's honour after she had gone by. The farmers had arranged that one of themselves—a young man called Jimmy Darch, who possessed the fastest horse in the parish—was to be posted a mile or so up the road; and as soon as he glimpsed the Royal cavalcade he was to gallop back to the village and give the signal for the ringers to wake the church bells. The elders of the village had been round to all the gardens and chosen the flowers they considered most worthy to be presented to their Queen. They had chosen something from every garden—tiger-lilies from the Rectory, four-season-

roses from the Barton, clove carnations from Lizzy Cobbledick's little flower-patch; and as well as this, everybody was taking great care of their hollyhocks and snapdragons and all their bravest flowers, so that they should be at their very best to garland the village street when the Queen rode by.

From the Rector to Diggery-Mole-Catcher there was not a soul in Broomhill but had done all they could before the great moment came to show Gloriana that they loved her and were glad of her coming. Everything that *could* be ready, *was* ready, and the village sat back and folded its hands and waited.

On the evening before the Queen's visit, Robin arrived home. Perdita had been watching and listening for him for hours, of course; and she rushed out from the garden to meet him the moment she heard the horse's hooves trampling up the lane. But somehow she did not feel quite so dancey as she usually did when Robin came home—which was odd, because she should have felt even more dancey than usual on such a wonderful occasion. And after he had hugged his mother, and shaken hands with his father, Robin took one look at her, and said, 'I say, you do look green!'

Then her father and mother looked at her carefully—and she did look green!

'Are you feeling quite well, Poppet?' asked Mistress Pettle.

Perdita said, 'Yes, I *think* so.' But she said it

rather doubtfully, and not long afterwards she was very sick indeed; and at the same time as she was sick she came out in spots all over her chest!

So her mother gave her a large dose of something that tasted horrible, out of the still-room, and tucked her up in bed, and said, 'Go to sleep, and you will be better in the morning.'

But in the morning Perdita was not better. She had even more spots than she had had the night before, and she felt dreadful. Mistress Pettle felt her forehead, and found that it was hot.

'Tim!' called Mistress Pettle; and the Rector came in and sat down on the edge of Perdita's little bed, and felt her forehead too.

'Hmmm. Hot!' he said. 'What have you been doing to yourself, Baby?'

'It's that gooseberry tart we had yesterday, I'm sure,' said Perdita's mother. 'I should not have let her have two helpings for dinner.'

Perdita had a dreadful feeling that it was not so much the two helpings of gooseberry tart, as the fact that she had spent a peaceful morning among the gooseberry bushes, and had perhaps eaten rather more than she had meant to, before she met the tart at all. She wondered if Billie would notice that some of the bushes looked a little bare; but she did not care—she was too miserable.

'Of course she cannot possibly get up,' her father said.

And that was that.

She would not be wearing her blue gown, she

would not be seeing the Queen. Some other little girl would be chosen, at the last moment, to take her place, and present the great flower-bunch to the Queen, and receive the Queen's smile in return, while she, Perdita, would be lying in bed, hot and headachy, with spots all over her chest and a dreadful swirling sensation in her inside. The Pharisees had betrayed her faith in them; they should not have *let* her eat those gooseberries!

Perdita wept, and outside the window the grey, blustery morning wept in sympathy, scattering chilly rain-drops against the panes. Her family were very kind to her, but very firm, and her mother gave her another horrible dose, and tucked her up again, and told her to go to sleep. Then she went away, leaving the door ajar.

Mistress Pettle found her menfolk at their breakfast, and told them that they must go to greet the Queen's Grace without her, because of course she could not leave Perdita alone in the house, and could not possibly ask Tryphena to stay with her, because Tryphena was not going to the Midsummer ball, and so would not have another chance to see the Queen.

The Rector sighed unhappily, because he had so wanted Mistress Pettle to be there with him.

But Robin said, 'I will stay with Perdita. After all, I am going with you to the ball, and I shall see Her Majesty there.'

Perdita's mother said she would not hear of such a thing; but after they had argued for a while,

Robin settled the matter by saying, respectfully but firmly, 'Mother dear, as the Rector's wife, it is your duty to go with Father.'

So Perdita's mother gave in, because she knew that really it *was* her duty.

Everybody was very busy all morning. Robin and the Rector and Billie-the-Garden helping the village to hang out its garlands and its white-and-scarlet banner; Mistress Pettle and Tryphena running back and forth between the Rectory and the Tithe Barn, fetching and carrying and arranging and re-arranging, and looking in every now and then to see that Perdita was all right.

Perdita had slept all morning, but she was wide awake and dreadfully miserable when her mother came to see how she was, before setting out to greet the Queen. Perdita's mother had on her Sunday gown of flowered tabby (the grey gown was for the ball), and the pearl earrings which the Rector had given her for a wedding present were in her ears, and she looked lovely. She stooped down and put her arms round Perdita, and rubbed her cheek against her little daughter's. 'You are being such a good girl! And you shall have a treat to help make up for this, Heartsease,' she said. 'Look, here's poor Jessica; she wants comforting, too.' And she picked up Jessica in her new blue kirtle from the foot of the bed, and tucked her in beside Perdita. Then she went away, with her stiff flowered skirts frou-frouing around her.

Perdita lay very still, clutching Jessica against

her, and stared at the grey, blustery afternoon, because if she stared hard enough it helped her not to cry. She heard Tryphena and Billie come round from the stable-yard and go across Parson's Platt; and then she heard her father and mother go out, and the front door shut behind them. And then she heard Robin's footsteps and a confused pattering on the stairs; and Robin pushed open her door and came in, with Bran and Peterkin behind him.

He sat down on the bed, and asked, 'Well, Poppet, did you think you were quite deserted?'

Perdita gazed at him forlornly; and there began to be a dreadful pricking behind her eyes, and an aching in her throat. She was going to cry again. She held her breath hard, trying not to; but it was no good: a huge sob rushed up from her chest, and then another, and Perdita gave up the fight. She shot up in bed with a howl, and flung herself into Robin's arms. 'Oh, I am so miser-ruble!' she wailed.

Robin hugged her close, trying to comfort her; but Perdita refused to be comforted. She wept on Robin's doublet, and wept, and wept. Bran put his front paws on the bed, and pushed at her anxiously with his nose, snuffling and whimpering, and blowing his hairy cheeks in and out; and Peterkin jumped right on to the bed with a scrabbling of paws, and, flinging up his head, howled in sympathy, as though his soft heart was breaking.

Robin sat patiently in the midst of the uproar, patting his sister on the back in a consoling sort of

way, and staring straight in front of him; while Perdita, Bran and Peterkin all wept on, with no signs of ever stopping again.

'Poppet,' he pleaded at last, 'you are making me so wet.'

Perdita made a valiant effort, and managed to stifle her sobs into a kind of gusty heaving, with an odd gulp and an occasional snuffle here and there.

'That's better,' said Robin; and he produced a rather grubby kerchief from somewhere about himself, and mopped Perdita's face with it. 'Blow,' he ordered.

Perdita blew.

'That's better,' said Robin again. 'Now lie down. Do you know, there's a boy at school who has red and black hair alternately! It starts red at the back of his neck, and when it has grown red right over to his forehead it begins to grow black again in just the same way. He does look so funny when it's half red and half black.'

Perdita gave a little watery giggle, because she knew Robin was trying to cheer her up. And Robin went and looked out of the window, with his shoulders hunched, whistling thoughtfully under his breath, with the two dogs, who had stopped weeping as soon as Perdita did so, bunched up against him.

Not long after that they heard horse-hooves coming at a gallop along the lane, and Perdita knew it must be Jimmy Darch, bringing word to

the village that the Queen was near. She gave a little gulp; and Robin swung round from the window and asked, 'How are you feeling, Poppet?'

'Miserable!' said Perdita.

'I know—but how do you feel in your inside?'

Perdita thought about this for a moment, and decided that her inside was certainly not swirling round and round as fast as it had been doing. 'Little bit better,' she said.

'Good! Then how would you like to sit on the window-seat, and see the Queen just for a moment as she passes by?' And he picked up Perdita's blue cloak with the crimson-lined hood, and dropped it on the bed. 'Bundle yourself up in that,' he said.

Perdita wasted no time on words. In frantic haste she scuttled out from under the bed-clothes, and into her cloak, and at that moment the church bells began to ring—Halsyon and Hautclere, Douce, John, and Gabriel, ringing as they had never rung before, until the air was full of a deep humming, and the squat church tower seemed to dance, and the rooks flapped up from the elm-trees, cawing in wild alarm.

'Hold tight to Jessica,' said Robin, and he scooped Perdita up, and sat her down with a slight thump on the broad window-seat. Then he pulled the coverlid from the bed, and wrapped her up in it like a little round green cocoon. Then he opened the window. The gay clamour of the bells poured in as the casement swung wide, and even above the

bells they could hear the people—Broomhill people, and people who had come in from other villages—cheering, shouting for the Queen's Grace.

Robin knelt on the window-seat, and put an arm round Perdita, to make sure she did not roll off; she was so round and roly-poly in her green cocoon. 'There!' he said. 'Now watch!'

Leaning forward through the window, Perdita watched, almost afraid to blink, in case the Queen and all her fairy train might pass the end of Parson's Platt in the twinkling of an eye, while she was not looking. The quiet greenness of Parson's Platt was edged with a bright border of country folk in their Sunday best, jostling each other cheerfully at the edge of the road, and all craning their necks for a first glimpse of the Queen. It was a grey, windy afternoon, but with little shreds and patches of blue sky showing through the greyness. There was quite a big lake of blue right over the church, as though the gay clamour of the bells had fountained upward and torn a hole in the clouds. And suddenly the sun came out, and all the world was sparkling.

Next moment, as though the sunshine had been a signal, the first riders of the Queen's escort trotted out from behind Five-Oak Spinney, into the little stretch of road which could be seen from the Rectory windows. Because they were upstairs, Perdita and Robin could look down over the heads of the people, and get a clear view of the Queen's train as it went by; and it was like watching a fairy

tale come to life—a cavalcade out of Elfland drawn across the end of Parson's Platt. First there were soldiers in blue cassocks, with their accoutrements flashing in the sunshine; then a group of splendidly mounted gentlemen, as gay as a charm of goldfinches in their bright doublets and jewelled and feathered bonnets. Next came the Queen's Ladies, swaying easily to the motion of their horses, smiling joyously at the folk beside the way, their silken farthingales sweeping almost to the ground.

Then there was a little gap, and Perdita leaned farther out than ever, holding her breath; and next moment out from behind the Spinney came an open horse-litter canopied with crimson and gold brocade. There were crimson trappings on the litter horses, and the sun flashed back from the golden Tudor Roses on the breasts of the riders, and from the gilded litter-poles and the golden loopings and swathings that edged the wonderful canopy. And in the heart of all this glow and flash and glitter sat Gloriana, in a white gown, with no colour about her at all, except for her red, high-piled hair.

Just for a moment the two in the Rectory window watched her, their chests swelling with loyalty. The onlookers across Parson's Platt yelled themselves hoarse, and the Queen bent her head and smiled, and made little gracious 'Thank you' gestures with her long, white hands, in acknowledgement of their cheers. Then the horse-litter had disappeared behind the grey buttress of the church,

and there were more ladies, and more jewelled gallants, and more blue-cassocked soldiers; and then just empty road again, except for the country folk who were crowding out from Parson's Platt and down from the hedges, to follow the Queen into the village.

The bells had stopped, and all the village was shouting—shouting for Queen Elizabeth.

Then the shouting stopped, too, and very faintly, because of the distance and the church between, Robin and Perdita heard their father reading his Greek address of welcome; and the clear, cool voice of the Queen, as she replied. Then the village children were singing, and in a little while the cheering began again, and the bells.

It was all over. The Queen's Grace had passed through Broomhill, and gone her way.

Robin shut the window, and carried Perdita back to bed.

'Oh—wasn't—she—lovely!' breathed Perdita, sitting in a bunch in the middle of the bed, and making no attempt to get under the bed-clothes.

Robin nodded, as he unwound the green cocoon and pulled up the blankets. He could not speak for the moment, because he had just seen Gloriana go by, and his love and loyalty were hurting him, deep down in his chest.

Perdita's mother came back soon, and Robin went off to join the festivities in the meadow below the Tithe Barn; and Perdita went to sleep, just a little comforted, because she had seen Queen

Elizabeth for a moment, even though it *was* from a distance. 'But I did think the Pharisees would know the difference between "near enough to touch" and the other side of Parson's Platt,' she thought, just before she fell asleep.

XI

ADAM INTRUDES UPON HIS QUEEN

NEXT day Perdita was much better—so much better that after dinner she was allowed to get up and come downstairs and sit in the wide, cushioned parlour window-seat, with Jessica in her lap, and the window open on to the warm, rain-washed, sunshiny garden. Robin had gone out as soon as dinner was over, no one knew where, and Bran had gone rabbiting with his friend, the wall-eyed sheep-dog from the Barton; but everyone else was as nice to Perdita as ever they could be. The Rector was out, too, visiting in the parish, but he had left his herbal open for her to look at. A herbal is a book about plants; this one was bound in faded rose-red leather, and had lovely wood-cut pictures of flowers on every page; it was a great treasure, and Perdita had never been allowed to have it in her own hands before. Billie-the-Garden had not said anything about the bareness of the gooseberry bushes, but he had found an enormous caterpillar with yellow tufts all down its back, and put it on a mulberry leaf, and brought it in for her. Tryphena had made her a little tree out of a twig in a pot, with pink and yellow marchpane apples on it, for her birthday, and put it on the parlour mantel, so that she might be cheered up by

the prettiness of it, though of course she must not touch it yet. Mistress Pettle brought her mending, and drew her high-backed chair up to the window, and said she would tell Perdita any story she liked. Even Peterkin brought a bone that he had found in the herb-garden, and dropped it on the cushion beside her, because he knew she was unhappy. It was Bran's bone really, but Perdita did not know that, and she thanked him politely, although she did not really want it; and presently he took it away again.

Poor Perdita! She tried valiantly not to show how dreadfully she minded about Queen Elizabeth; but there was a sort of black pit inside her, that seemed to dim even the sunshine. She wasn't interested in the caterpillar with yellow tufts down its back; she wasn't even interested in her mother's story; and she thought the marchpane apples on the little tree looked horrid.

Presently Mistress Pettle went upstairs to fetch the Rector's best black doublet, which had a place that needed mending in one sleeve; and while she was gone, a Pharisee who had been hovering among the tall, speckle-throated tiger-lilies under the window fluttered up on to the sill. He was a bright, fierce little creature, with a body that flickered and shone like a point of flame, and dark blotches on his orange wings. 'Perdita!' he called, in his small churring voice, 'Perdita! Why do you look so sorry?'

Perdita looked at him reproachfully. 'I suppose

even the Pharisees make mistakes sometimes,' she said. 'But I did think you knew the difference between "near enough to touch" and the other side of Parson's Platt!'

The Pharisee drew himself up to twice his usual height, and folded his wings down his back, and looked at Perdita even more reproachfully than she had looked at him. 'You are a nasty, ungrateful, impatient small human,' he said with dignity. 'You do not deserve—if it were not that you are a friend of ours——' He darted away, with a flash and flicker of orange wings, so that Perdita did not hear the end of his remarks. But perched on a tiger-lily bud, he turned for a moment, and said slowly and distinctly, 'We are much affronted!' Then he was gone.

'Oh dear!' thought Perdita, and then, 'But I'm *not* sorry. They *should* have known the difference between "near enough to touch" and the other side of Parson's Platt!'

And next moment her mother came back, carrying the doublet to be mended.

At that moment Robin was making his way through the wide gardens of Brendon Hall. Neither he nor Adam liked the great new red-brick house that Sir John had built on to the old grey one, nor the fine gardens laid out in lawns and terraces, temples and marble statues and straight paths edged with square-clipped yew hedges, and flat flower-beds (like the carpet bedding in modern parks). It was all too big and grand and formal,

and it always made them feel as though they had mud on their boots and ought to wipe them.

The gardens were grander than ever that day, and much gayer, for they were full of the Lords and Ladies of the Queen's Court, sauntering across the lawns and sitting in the marble temples, in jewelled bonnets and padded trunk-hose, or bone-lace coifs and satin farthingales. But the two boys had their own roads through the grounds—the same sort of hidden roads that Rabbit and Fox and Brock the Badger followed; and so Robin arrived at the kitchen door without having come face to face with any of the gay gentlefolk in the gardens or the strange servants who thronged the kitchen plots and drying-green and stable-yards.

When he stuck his head round the kitchen door, he found the place full of people and dogs and hurry-scurry, and the smell of a hundred different sorts of pies and marchpanes, and the sizzling of the great joints of venison and the swans and poultry roasting on spits before the roaring fire. 'Hi! Samuel Kent!' he called to the fat steward who was overseeing the preparations for Her Majesty's supper. 'Where is Master Adam?'

'My dear soul!' said Samuel Kent, holding his head in desperation. (He was not used to feeding Royalty.) 'How should I know?'

But a brown, wizened gardener who had just come in with a basket of peas, said, 'Young Master be down in the mews—leastways, a' was just now.'

So Robin went off through the stable-yard to the mews.

(A mews is a place for hawks, just as a stable is a place for horses and a kennel is a place for dogs.) Sir John's mews was a kind of shed, opening into a narrow yard of its own. One end of the shed was screened off into a cubby-hole for Job the Falconer, with a fireplace, and shelves full of all the tools of his trade. The beautiful proud Gyrfalcon had a screened-off place to herself at the opposite end; and between the two, on blocks and bow-perches all down the middle of the shed, were the rest of Sir John's hawks and falcons. There was Grim the spar hawk, and a cast (that is, a pair) of young peregrine falcons that had been brought from Lundy only that spring; and Clyte, the elegant little merlin who was Lady Annersly's own, and Bathsheba, the Goshawk.

Except for the young peregrines, they were all deep in moult, and looked humpy and rather disagreeable.

Adam had taken 'Sheba on to his gloved fist, and was talking to her softly, and stroking her down her back. You have to visit a hawk often when she is moulting, and talk to her, and pick her up, otherwise she grows wild and sulky and forgets all her training.

'Robin!' he exclaimed. 'What brings you here, old lad?'

Robin explained about Perdita and the gooseberries and the Queen's Grace.

Adam listened in silence, still stroking Bathsheba.

Then he nodded, and put the Goshawk carefully back on her bow-perch, fastening her to it by her leg-straps (jesses, they were called). 'Come into the cubby-hole. Job isn't there, so we shall have the place to ourselves,' he said.

The cubby-hole was very small, and it was so full of things that there was only just room for both boys. There were a couple of spare bow-perches in the corners, and a work-bench covered with glue-pots and hanks of waxed thread, and strips of leather for new jesses and hoods, and boxes of moulted flight-feathers for mending any that the hawks might break. Part of the walls were covered with shelves on which were surgical instruments and bundles of herbs and jars of rhubarb and antimony and sulphur for doctoring the birds when they were ill or hurt, and old and new hawk-hoods of leather with bunches of feathers on top which Job the Falconer had made to pass the time on winter evenings. Elsewhere on the walls hung leashes and hawk-bells and lures made of wood covered with pigeon's wings on the end of a long string, which were used in training the birds.

Adam took off the big hawking glove, and, clearing a space at one end of the bench, sat down, arms akimbo, and stared into the low fire. Robin leaned against a clear patch of wall and watched him.

'Poor little Perdita! She must be so dreadfully unhappy,' Adam said at last; and then, 'We will have to do something about it.'

'Yes, that's why I came over to see you. I thought we might smuggle her in for a closer view—or something.'

'Mmm,' said Adam, still staring into the fire. 'Will she be quite well again by to-morrow?'

'Lord, yes! She is all right now, really. She was getting up when I came out this afternoon.'

'Then she shall come to the ball to-morrow night! That's the thing.'

Robin shook his head. 'Your aunt and uncle wouldn't ever invite her. She's too little, I mean—she's not old enough to dance—or big enough, and they know it.'

'I can't dance, either,' said Adam. 'We'll be company for each other.'

'Still, they would never ask her.'

'Of course they wouldn't—not unless Her Majesty desired it,' replied Adam, and his eyes were dancing.

Robin whistled shrilly. 'Adam, you madman! You'd never ask her!'

'Yes, I will.'

'But you won't be allowed near her. 'Tisn't as though you were grown up.'

'I know,' said Adam, smiling down his nose, and mimicking his uncle's pompous tones. 'Boys! I know boys! Just let me catch you hanging around the Queen's Grace, trying to bring yourself to her notice, and I'll flay the hide off you!' Then he added in his own voice, 'But I'll manage it somehow.'

Robin stared at his friend for a moment in silence. Then he drew a long breath, and said, 'I believe you will. Look, if you should run into trouble, send word to me, and I'll come and take my share of the hiding. After all, Perdita's my sister.'

'You zany!' said Adam, laughing.

They remained in the cubby-hole a little while longer, talking about the Queen's Grace; for of course Adam had been presented to her when she arrived, and had seen her from a distance quite often since then, and Robin wanted to hear all about her—everything the other could tell him about her, in the greatest possible detail.

Then Robin went home again; and Adam went to look for an opportunity of speaking with Queen Elizabeth alone.

That evening after supper Queen Elizabeth walked alone in Sir John's rose-garden, in a gown of golden taffeta, with pearls round her long white throat and pearls in her red hair. The rose-garden was the pleasantest corner of the broad Hall grounds and Gloriana had taken it for her own private garden as soon as she saw it, and demanded that no one else should be allowed into it. So she was rather surprised when, as she went pacing down a long path among the roses, a dark, thin boy whom she recognized as Sir John's nephew came wriggling through the sweet-briar hedge and dropped on one knee in front of her.

Queen Elizabeth halted, and looked down at him. 'This is a strange way to break in upon

your Queen, sirrah!' said she, in a clear, cold voice.

'I beg your Majesty's forgiveness,' replied Adam. 'I had to get word with your Majesty, and there was no other way in which I could do it.'

The Queen raised her delicate eyebrows. 'Oh? It must be something greatly important to bring you bursting through my hedge in that unmannerly way, I am sure.' Then she stamped. 'What is it? Plague take the lad, don't kneel there mum-chance. What is it?'

Adam said, 'It is one of your most loyal subjects, your Majesty: the little maid who was to have presented flowers to you as you rode through Broomhill. She was ill, and so someone else took her place. Now she's breaking her heart, because she wanted to see you so very much, Ma'am.'

Suddenly the Queen smiled; and the smile crept into her voice when she next spoke. 'Your name is Adam, is it not? Well, get up, Adam, and tell me about this loyal subject of mine.'

So Adam got up from his knee, and told Queen Elizabeth all about Perdita; how she was the sister of his friend, Robin Pettle, and the Rector of Broomhill's little daughter, and about the Queen Elizabeth story that her mother so often told her, and about the gooseberries.

The Queen listened gravely, with her bright black eyes on his face. Then she said, 'What would you have the Queen do about this small, loyal subject of hers?'

Adam swallowed, and began to speak very fast indeed, stuttering a little with eagerness. 'Your Majesty knows there is to be a b-ball here in your honour to-morrow night, and half the County coming to it; Robin Pettle is bidden with his parents, but not Perdita because she is only nine and everybody thinks that too young; b-but if you, Ma'am, were to express a wish to have her bidden, of course she would be. And Robin and I would be responsible for her.'

Queen Elizabeth nodded, and her black eyes began to dance. 'She shall certainly be bidden to to-morrow's ball,' she said. 'It shall be a Royal Command!'

XII

THE WISH COMES TRUE

PERDITA stood in the kitchen doorway, very still and quiet because of the happiness that was singing inside her. She was wearing her blue silk gown, and her coif and ruff of bone lace, and the red enamelled rose that Adam had given her for a Christmas fairing. She had been poked and patted into them by her mother and Tryphena, and then told to go away and amuse herself *without* getting rumpled while the rest of the family got ready. So here she stood in the kitchen doorway, watching a yellow wagtail who was scuttling up and down the stable roof, while upstairs in her chamber, before her big polished mirror, her mother was putting on the grey damask kirtle and the embroidered farthingale, to dance at the Queen's ball.

'Me, too. I'm going to see the Queen's Grace,' said Perdita aloud, and smiled blissfully at the wagtail. The wagtail took no particular notice, so she explained more loudly, 'It is my birthday, and I am going to see the Queen.'

Only that morning, while they were all at breakfast, a groom had arrived from Brendon Hall, bringing the wonderful note from Lady Annersly which requested that Perdita might come with her family to the ball, and added, 'Her Majesty desires it.

'But how does the Queen *know* about Perdita?' Perdita's mother had asked, sitting down very suddenly, when she had finished reading the note. 'What does it all *mean*?'

And Perdita's father had glanced at Robin for an instant, and smiled his slow smile, and said, 'Ask no questions, my dear.'

And Robin, who had been sitting with his mouth wide open, and astonishment spread all over his face, suddenly blushed bright pink, and choked over a slice of bread and honey.

Oh, it was a lovely birthday! The sun shone, and a little wind blew to keep it company, and everybody had given Perdita the presents she wanted most, and everybody had fussed round her, and she had loved her family so much all day that it almost hurt, and now she was going to see the Queen! But there had been no Pharisees all day, and she must make her peace with them first.

She listened for a moment, her head on one side, but there was no sound of anyone close at hand. Then she kilted up her blue skirts to keep the hem from being dirtied, and danced out into the garden, where the sunshine and the little wind were playing with the branches of the mulberry-tree. There was not a Pharisee to be seen as she half ran, half danced, down the path between the tall hollyhocks, but of course there would not be—not until she had said she was sorry. She ran right down the garden until she reached the door in the wall. She opened it wide, and standing half in the garden

and half in the orchard, she held out her arms and cried, 'Pharisees, dear Pharisees, I'm going to see the Queen. Thank you for making my wish come true. I'm sorry I was cross.'

For a moment nothing happened, and then, with a whirring and fluttering of wings, the Pharisees came—garden Pharisees and Pharisees of the Wild; broom-yellow eyes and wild hair and tiny beating wings. Perdita stood in the doorway and they whirled round her, jigging and hovering up and down like gnats on a fine day, and crying out in their little churring voices, 'Perdita is going to see the Queen. Perdita is sorry she was cross. There's your mother calling, Perdita. Run, Perdita, run!'

So Perdita knew she was forgiven, which was a great relief to her; and she kilted up her skirts again, and next moment she was running back up the path between the tall yellow and pink hollyhocks. Her mother was standing on the back door sill, looking oh, so lovely in her grey kirtle and her farthingale that was as yellow as candle-light, and as soon as she saw Perdita she called out in a laughing, exasperated sort of voice, '*Poppet!* where have you been? We are all waiting to start.' And without stopping for an answer, bundled her through the house to the front door, where her father and Robin were waiting. Tansie and Linnet were waiting, too, with Billie at their heads; and as soon as Mistress Pettle had wrapped herself and Perdita in light cloaks to preserve their gowns from the dust of the highway, the menfolk swung into

their saddles. The Rector took Mistress Pettle up behind him, and Robin took Perdita; Tryphena came from the kitchen to see them off, and at the last moment the dogs, who had been mouse-hunting in the wood-pile, arrived, and began to jump about and bark. Then they were off, trotting along the country road between hedgerows powdered white with June-tide dust, and all a-blowing with dog-roses and tall sentinel foxgloves—going to see the Queen!

It was the first time that Perdita had even been to Brendon Hall, and even from the outside the rose-red grandeur of it made her quite breathless; but when she got into the great entrance hall, she thought to herself that surely even the Queen's Palace at Westminster could not be larger or more grand, or have more people in it; gentlewomen and gentlemen, all looking as fine as kings and queens, and servants almost as grand as the gentlefolk. It was almost frightening, and Perdita kept very close to her mother as they went up a wide, shallow stairway with beautiful balusters and newel-posts carved with vines and pomegranates, and across the kind of upstairs hall at the top into a huge bed-chamber full of ladies chattering and tidying their hair in front of polished mirrors and brushing the dust from the hems of their gowns, for of course they had all come on horseback, some of them from a long way off. Perdita's mother took off her own cloak and Perdita's, and tidied and brushed herself, and tidied and brushed Perdita; and then they

went back to the room at the head of the stairs, where the Rector and Robin were waiting for them.

They joined the stream of people passing through the wide, carved doorway, into the Long Gallery, where the ball was to be held. It was all like being in a breathless dream to Perdita, and, close behind Robin, carefully remembering her manners, she curtseyed to Lady Annersly (who seemed to be nothing but an enormous expanse of cherry-coloured velvet farthingale) and to Sir John (whose dark green trunks were stuffed out so fat and round, in the latest fashion, that she wondered how he ever managed to sit down).

The Long Gallery was a huge, huge room, that ran all the way from the high oriel window at one end of the house to the high oriel window at the other. Doors opened into it down one side from the main guest chambers, and all down the other side were long windows looking away over the rolling countryside to the Channel. Evening sunlight still lay on the hills, but the Long Gallery was lit by the glimmering crocus flames of a thousand candles that were reflected back into a thousand more by mirrors of silvery Venetian glass; and under the candles and reflected in the mirrors moved a slowly sweeping, swirling, curtseying, bowing throng of people which grew larger every moment.

Perdita gave a little gasp, and slid her hand in Robin's, and he gave it a reassuring squeeze; and

next instant Adam swooped out on them from behind a stout lady in a gold-and-purple farthingale, and caught her other hand. 'C-come along, both of you,' he ordered.

Quietly they slipped away between the gorgeous throng, and a moment later they were outside in the room at the head of the stairs again, without anyone even noticing that they had gone. Adam was good at that sort of thing.

Adam had grown taller since the Christmas holidays, and he looked strange and gallant and grown-up in the doublet and hose of fine black cloth, which he wore with an air that made it seem as gay as scarlet.

Perdita would have liked to stand still for a moment and look at him properly, but evidently there was no time. 'Please, where are we going?' she asked, as he hustled her along through one room after another.

'We're going to see the Queen,' said Adam. 'The three of us. She d-desires it. Come on.'

Perdita said 'Oh!' and then again 'O-oh!' And she was almost crying with excitement as she scurried along between the two boys.

Robin never said a word, until they came to a kind of ante-room, full of beautiful furniture and hangings, with a carved doorway at its farther end, hung with scarlet curtains and with two very gorgeous gentlemen on guard before it. Then he said, 'Is Her Majesty in there?' in the sort of voice that people use in church.

And Perdita said, 'I think—I feel sick.'

Adam stopped in his tracks, and as they were all holding hands, the others had to stop, too. 'No, you don't!' he said firmly. 'You are going to see the Queen, just as you have always wished to. Forward march, Madam Perdita!'

So Perdita forward marched.

The two boys held her hands right up to the scarlet-hung doorway. Then one of the gorgeous gentlemen pulled aside the curtain, and smiled at her; and they let go her hands, and dropped back to follow close behind. Perdita took a deep breath, and walked forward into the small tapestry-hung parlour where the Queen was waiting.

Queen Elizabeth sat very upright, in a great chair of carved oak that was almost like a throne. Her feet were on a golden footstool, and her white gown glimmered against the warm deep greens and golds and apricot-reds of the tapestries. As soon as Perdita saw her, she forgot to feel sick, and she forgot her manners and the sweeping curtsey she had meant to make, and leaving Adam and Robin to drop on one knee just inside the doorway and wait to be noticed, she walked straight forward, over a royal carpet of green rushes starred with pale flowers of meadowsweet (for meadowsweet was ever the Queen's favourite strewing herb), until her blue kirtle touched against the stiff white brocade of the Queen's great farthingale. Then she dropped a little bobbing curtsey, and stood very still, looking up at Queen Elizabeth, and Queen Elizabeth sat

very still, looking down at Perdita; and they smiled at each other.

Perdita had expected the Queen to be wearing a golden crown, but she was not; only strings of milky pearls twisted in her flame-red hair, which was lovelier than any crown could have been. There were pearl-drops in her ears, too, and pearls round her long, white throat, and tiny pearls edging the knots of flame-coloured ribbon on her wide, melon-shaped sleeves. There were jewels on her fingers, and jewels on her slippers; and a great collar of point lace rose up from her shoulders, spreading out behind her head, as delicate as frost-flowers and as proud as a peacock's tail.

Perdita remembered all these things afterwards, but she was never quite sure *how* she remembered them, because at the time she seemed not to see anything but the Queen's pale face and her wide, lovely mouth and bright, dark eyes.

'Well, my small, loyal subject,' said Queen Elizabeth. 'And so you wanted very badly to see me?'

'Yes, please,' whispered Perdita.

'I trust you are quite recovered from the gooseberries?' said Elizabeth, gravely.

'Please, how did you know about the gooseberries, your Majesty?'

'Robin told Adam, and Adam told me,' said the Queen. 'He came bursting through the hedge, like a very desperate character, as I walked in Sir John's rose-garden last evening, and told me all

about the gooseberries, and the Queen Elizabeth story, and everything, so we commanded Sir John to bid you here to-night.'

Perdita nodded, with her eyes fixed on the Queen's face. And the Queen nodded back, gravely. Then she looked up and deigned to notice the two boys who were still waiting patiently by the door. She beckoned to them, and when they came and stood on either side of Perdita she gave her hand to each in turn, with a smile, and a small regal bending of her proud head.

'Perdita is fortunate to have two such staunch and true servants,' said she; and then, 'Will you be as staunch and true to me one day? to me, and England?'

Adam stood very straight and still. 'Yes, your Majesty,' he said, in a voice that was not at all like his everyday one, because for once there was not a scrap of laughter in it.

And Robin flushed up like a girl, and said, 'To the death, Madam.'

Queen Elizabeth looked at them very kindly for a moment, and then began to talk to Perdita again; but in a little while she looked up at Robin, and asked what he was going to do when he left school. And suddenly Robin began to tell her about the ship of his own that he meant to captain one day, and his ideas about trade with India.

The Queen was very interested in Robin's ideas about trade with India. (One of the things that made Elizabeth's people love her so much, was that

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CENTRAL SCHOOL

she was always interested in them and anything they had to tell her.) She asked him a lot of questions. Then she turned to Adam and asked, 'And is it the sea for you, too?'

Adam shook his head. 'No, Madam, it is the land for me. When Robin turns seaman, I shall turn farmer.'

'Here?' asked Elizabeth.

'Oh no; I shall farm my own land, over at Broomhill.'

'The little grey manor house at the end of the village, is that yours?'

Adam said, 'Yes, Your Majesty.'

'Well,' said Queen Elizabeth, 'may you be a good farmer, Adam Hilyarde; and Robin Pettle, may you be a bold seaman.'

A second door at the far end of the room opened, letting in a hum of voices and a swirl of music and a glow of candle-light on swaying colours. It also let in a gorgeous, worried-looking gentleman, who shut it behind him, and after bending the knee to Queen Elizabeth, came and hovered at her right elbow.

'Well, my Lord?' demanded the Queen.

'Your Majesty,' said the worried-looking gentleman. 'The ball awaits your Majesty's coming.'

'It will do the ball no harm to wait a little longer.'

The gentleman sighed, and protested almost tearfully. 'But your Majesty's guests——'

'The devil fly away with my Majesty's guests!' said the Queen very clearly, 'and you too!'

'Yes, your Majesty. It shall be as your Majesty

desires,' replied the gentleman, in a flurried sort of voice, and bowing low, disappeared as quickly as possible by the way he had come.

'There!' said Queen Elizabeth, smiling radiantly at the three before her, but especially at Perdita. And with a sudden movement she pulled one of the knots of flame-coloured ribbon from her sleeve (it must have been very loosely sewn on!) and held it out to Perdita. 'You shall wear the Queen's favour, my small, loyal subject,' said she.

For a moment Perdita did not take it, but only stood twisting her hands in her blue kirtle, because she wanted it so desperately, and could not believe that the Queen was really going to give it to her. 'Please, is it for me?'

'For you,' said Elizabeth, very kindly.

So she held out her hands, and the Queen dropped the knot of ribbons into them. Perdita looked at it lying there in her cupped palms, and she felt as though something inside her must burst from happiness. She took a deep breath, and said, '*Thank* you, dear Queen Elizabeth!'

'As for you two,' said the Queen to Adam and Robin, 'if you wish for ribands from the Queen's sleeve you must first earn them, for I do not give my favours lightly. Robin, when you return from your first voyage as captain of your own ship, come to me, and claim your favour; I shall not forget that I promised it to you. And Adam, one day I shall ride through Broomhill again; will you give me hospitality?'

'I shall be very p-proud, your Majesty,' said Adam, eagerly.

The Queen smiled a wide, lovely smile, and said, 'Then you shall show me the results of your farming, and if I find you are a good farmer, and your land and your beasts and your people are happy, then you may come to me in your own hall, and claim your riband. Now you must go, all of you.'

So she dismissed them; and Perdita remembered her manners and made the low, sweeping curtsey that she *should* have made at first. Then they were all three outside the scarlet-hung doorway again; and a young gentlewoman who must have been waiting in the ante-room gathered up her skirts and went past them into the Queen's chamber.

'I s'pose the Queen will be coming out soon, and that maid will have gone in to help her arrange her train,' said Perdita, breathlessly, as they scurried back through the great house.

'But we've seen her first' said Robin, in a cracked, exultant sort of voice. 'We've spoken to the Queen! *Us!*'

Adam only said, 'Come along, or we shan't be in time to see her entrance.'

A few moments later they arrived, breathless and bright of eye, back in the Long Gallery, among the gay folks and the candle-shine, and the soft strains of viol and lute and harpsichord.

Then Perdita caught sight of her mother, and, leaving the boys, ran to her, dodging and swerving

between the people. 'Mammy, Mammy, have you a pin?'

'Poppet!' exclaimed Mistress Pettle. 'Where have you been?'

'We've been with the Queen's Grace!' gabbled Perdita—'Robin and Adam and me. We've been with the Queen, and she gave me *this*, and please Mammy have you a pin?' And she opened her hands and showed her mother the knot of flame-coloured ribbons.

Perdita's mother opened her eyes very wide. 'You've been——' But there was no time to ask questions, for Sir John Annersly had been summoned from the Gallery, and at any moment he would come back with the Queen's Grace. So she took a pin from her sleeve, and hastily pinned the Queen's favour into the breast of Perdita's little blue gown; and Perdita beamed at her, and darted off again like a kingfisher to join Robin and Adam.

Next moment the music and the hum of voices died away, and there was a long, lovely, breathless pause. Everyone turned towards the door at the far end of the Gallery. Then it opened, and Queen Elizabeth came pacing through, with one hand resting on Sir John Annersly's dark-green sleeve, her red hair like flame in the candle-light, and her high heels tapping on the polished floor, and four of her ladies following her, in farthingales of rose and azure, saffron and lime-leaf green.

At her coming, all the gentlemen bowed low, and all the gentlewomen sank down and down in

their best and most billowing Court curtsies. And Gloriana made a little gracious bending of her head in return, as Sir John Annersly led her to the great chair that had been set ready for her. When she had seated herself and spread out her skirts, he began to bring up the most important of his guests, to be presented to her; St. Ledgers, Stucleys, Careys, Grenvilles and all the great folk of North Devon came and made their reverence to their Queen before the dancing began. But Elizabeth did not forget the others, and all evening in between the dances, she would send for this person or that, so that not one of Sir John's guests went home that night without having spoken with the Queen and received a smile from her.

Robin was drawn into the dancing as soon as it began, and Perdita watched him go, and said, 'It will be nice when I am old enough to dance with grown-ups.'

'Never mind,' said Adam. 'We'll keep each other company.'

'Please—aren't you going to dance?'

Adam laughed. 'I can't,' he said, and glanced down at his crooked foot.

'But you danced in Samarkand the Golden.'

'That was quite different. It was just you and me and the Tapestry folk. And besides, people can do things in Samarkand that they can't do in the Down-Here World. This is the Down-Here World, and I can't dance in it. See?'

Perdita saw. She tucked her hand boldly into

Adam's, and they went and sat in one of the deep window-seats, where they could see everything—the dancers and musicians and the Queen in her great carved chair—without anyone really noticing that they were there at all. And if they turned round a little, and looked out through the diamond panes, they could see the sunset beyond Lundy, and the sky dappled all over with little sunset clouds like curling golden feathers. It was a nice window-seat, perched between the sunset and the candleshine, and Perdita snuggled blissfully into her corner of it, and drew her feet up under her, and began to watch the drifting, swirling patterns of the dances. The Galliards formed gay, intricate patterns that made her head feel quite swimmy to watch; but the Pavanes made grand, stately patterns, the dancers pacing slowly and formally in time to the stately music, the wide farthingales of the ladies swaying to their movements, like giant crown-imperials in a breath of wind. Some of the Court ladies were very beautiful, and their gowns were even more beautiful than the ladies who wore them; but Perdita watched her mother swaying down the dance in her grey kirtle and yellow farthingale, and thought that except for the Queen she was quite the loveliest lady there.

Sometimes Adam told her who the people were—the Great Folk of the County, and the Great Folk of the Court—and sometimes they just sat in silence watching. Sometimes Robin came and joined them, because he did not forget that he was respon-

sible for half of Perdita for that evening; and sometimes he went back to the dancing, and it was just the two of them again. Outside, the afterglow faded little by little into the dusk, so that when Perdita looked out the hills and the sea and Lundy had all disappeared, and instead the window was full of flickering points of light and the swirl of thousand-coloured velvets and brocades, as the reflections of the dancers lilted across the diamond panes.

Presently there were lovely things to eat, downstairs in the Great Hall, and almost every dish was decorated with sugar cupids and sailing-ships; and after Perdita and the two boys had eaten as much as they comfortably could, they went and explored the old part of the house—at least, Adam and Perdita did; Robin had managed to get into conversation with one of the Queen's Gentlemen whom he had discovered to be also a sailor, and was asking him about his voyages, and had forgotten everything else.

The old part of the house was very quiet and empty; instead of candle-light there was only the glimmer of the rising moon, and the music and gaiety of the ball in the Long Gallery came faintly through the thick old walls, like the murmur of the sea in a shell. Most of the chambers were used as store-rooms now; one was the armoury. But at last they came to a little door up a narrow flight of steps, and Adam opened it, and they went in.

'This was the Sola—the living-room—before my

uncle built the grand new part of the house,' said he, softly, as though he loved the room.

There was a tall, traceried window set deep in the opposite wall, with two steps leading up to it, and window-seats on either side in the thickness of the wall for you to sit in and look out over the rolling countryside to Exmoor. And the midsummer moonshine slanted in through the window, right across the room to their feet.

Perdita followed where Adam led, along the silver moon-path, and up the two steps into the window embrasure; then he turned her round, and said, 'Look! Here are some old friends of yours and mine.'

Perdita looked, and she saw that the wall by the door was hung with a great piece of tapestry. And there, among their forest depths and flowering trees and fairy castles, glimmering in the moonlight were Mary Rose and the Dowager Duchess of Devonshire and Gwyn Ap Nudd, and all the rest of them.

'It's the Tapestry Folk,' whispered Perdita. 'Our dear Tapestry Folk, like in Samarkand the Golden.'

Then a little fluttering overhead made her look up and she saw a cloud of Pharisees among the delicate stone tracery of the window-arch. Just for a moment she saw them, with the moon shining through their wings and making them gleam like mother-o'-pearl. Then they were gone; and Perdita heard their little churring voices fading away

into the golden summer moonshine: 'Perdita has seen the Queen! Perdita has seen the Queen!'

Adam said, 'Are you seeing fairies, Madam Perdita?'

'Yes,' said Perdita; and then she remembered that she had not yet said 'Thank you' to Adam. So she said, 'Please, Adam, thank you for my seeing the Queen.'

Adam swept her a low and superbly swaggering bow. 'Pray don't mention it, my Lady,' said he. 'Am I not your Ladyship's servant, to work your Ladyship's will in all things?' Then he stopped being grand, and caught her hand and said, 'We must go back, little maid, or your mother will be thinking I have let you fall down the well.'

So they went back.

They had been gone so long that when they again reached the Long Gallery the hands of the beautiful black-and-gold lacquered clock beside the door were pointing to almost midnight, and the musicians had stopped playing for galliards and pavanes, and were playing country-dance tunes instead; for balls in the country, though they began with the stately measures of the Court, always ended with the dances of the countryside. So Perdita knew that the Midsummer Ball was nearly over, and any moment now the Queen's Grace would go away through the door at the far end of the Gallery. Then there would be Good-byes and Thank-yous, and the ride home through the moon-washed lanes, with the night air full of the scent of

honeysuckle and new-mown hay, and then bed. The lovely day would be over; but she had seen the Queen, and the Queen had given her a knot of ribbons from her own sleeve.

Then the musicians began to play for the last dance of all. And it was 'Greensleeves'!

. . . . .

Years and years afterwards, when Whinworthy was a proper, lived-in house again, with candle-light in its windows after dusk, and a garden full of tiger-lilies and sops-in-wine; when Perdita was grown-up and married to Adam, and had children of her own, she used to tell them two Queen Elizabeth stories—the one her mother had told her when she was little, and the one that she had been part of herself. And as she told the stories, sitting in the evening by the fire, memories came back of the Grey Maiden and the Tapestry Folk and the moon up on the crest of Broomhill: and the night outside seemed filled again with the clamour of bells, ringing for Gloriana.